ATTENTION: © Copyright The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. The following materials can be used for educational and other noncommercial purposes without the written permission of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. These materials are not to be used for resale or commercial purposes without written authorization from the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. All materials cited must be attributed to the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Conducted by Laura Calkins, Ph.D.
April 2, 14, 30; May 14, 28; July 16; August 5; October 15, 22, 29; November 5, 2004; January 21, 28; February 18, 25; March 18, 25; May 13, 20; June 17, 29; July 22, 29; August 12, 19; September 2, 9; October 21; November 4, 11; December 23, 2005; January 10; February 10, 17; March 10; April 14, 21; May 5,12,19; June 16, 23; July 21; August 4, 11; September 8, 15, 22; October 27; November 3; December 8, 15, 2006; January 26; February 9, 16; March 9; July 20, 2007
Transcribed by Jessica Harrell, and Mindy Moser

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [ ] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University beginning an oral history interview with Mr. Joseph Mendenhall, former Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. State Department. Today's date is the second of April 2004. I am in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Mr. Mendenhall is in Boulder City, Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning.

LC: First to begin the interview, I wonder if you would just give us some general biographical data. Where were you born, sir, and when?

JM: I was born in the state of Maryland in 1920.

LC: Okay. Your years of service with the State Department span what period?

JM: They extended from 1946 to 1975. I joined the—took the Foreign Service exam for officers and joined the Foreign Service after four-and-a-half years in the Army in 1946 and continued to serve until I elected to retire in 1975.

LC: As we will discuss later in the interview, a goodly amount of your professional career was spent dealing with Southeast Asian affairs?

JM: That's correct.

LC: Okay. Sir, I understand that you would like to discuss your views on the conflict and the era. I invite you to go ahead and do that.

JM: Thank you. I have some very decided views on the Vietnam War. I'm going to expound them with the permission of Dr. Calkins. The first thing I want to examine is why it's still important to look for the causes of our loss of the Vietnam War. The reason is because the consequences have been with us for the past thirty years and they are still with us today.

LC: Yes, sir.

JM: First, after our loss in Vietnam and our pullout in 1975, the Soviets who were our principal enemy at that time took the occasion because of our loss to do whatever they thought they could get away with to, "shift the balance of forces," as they put it, in the world in their favor and against us. They steadily expanded their influence and activities in Africa in the late 1970s, in Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola, for example, and then climaxed that with their direct invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which we considered a threat to our access to oil supplies from the Middle East, which are essential to both our security and our economy. The Soviets thought they could get away with this without any response on our part, but we did respond by helping the Muslims who were insurgents who opposed them. We helped them with both training and arms of very substantial quantities. However, whenever one is forced, whenever a nation is forced to resort to war because the credibility of its deterrent has diminished or disappeared, the consequences cannot always be foreseen. What happened in the Afghan war, one of the consequences was that by helping to train and arm the opposition to the Soviets in Afghanistan, it turned out we had trained and armed fanatics who eventually would turn against us the same capability and arms, which we had furnished to them. Just to point out an analogy, which Americans are better aware of, in World War II we faced—the greatest enemy we faced in Europe was, of course, Hitler and Nazi Germany. In order to try to deal with that great threat to us effectively, we allied ourselves with Stalin's Soviet Union, which was the correct policy at the time. But after Nazi Germany had been defeated, then we found ourselves confronted with a forty-five-year Cold War with the very Soviet Union with which we had allied ourselves during World War II. The consequences of a war are not by any means always foreseeable and can be very

severe. So it's better, if possible, to maintain the credibility of a deterrent and not have to resort to war. Now a second consequence of our loss in Vietnam was the seizure of our embassy and other official personnel in Iran in 1979 by the revolutionary Islamic government there. Again, they thought that we would not react and that they could get away with this with impunity. Then a third consequence of our loss of the war in Vietnam was that when Saddam Hussein in 1990 decided to move into Kuwait, our threat to react against him was not credible in his eyes because of what had happened over the past fifteen years. Therefore, he moved into Kuwait and threatened to move against Saudi Arabia, and we were forced to resort to the first Gulf War against him. Now still today, we can see the consequences of the loss of the war in Vietnam in what is happening in the guerrilla activities in Iraq today. The people who are mounting those attacks think that if they can inflict enough casualties on us, we will lose our political will to continue the struggle in Iraq against them. We'll be forced by this loss of political will in the United States to pull our forces out of Iraq, just as we did in Vietnam thirty years ago. So the loss of Vietnam has had immense subsequent consequences for us, and therefore it is important to see what lessons can be learned from that loss and what has happened since. There are in my view two main lessons, one which I think is quite evident to most Americans. That is to maintain our military power in being. The second is much less evident, I think, to most Americans, but equally important in terms of geopolitical policy, and that is to maintain the credibility that that military power will be used and will be used effectively when we are challenged and when our national interests are threatened. As one examines the history of the last thirty or even fifty years, the importance of credibility becomes evident, but it's not that clear, unfortunately, to many Americans and even to many members of Congress and I think even to some who have been president. Laura, I would like to—may I call you Laura?

LC: Please do, sir. Yes, of course.

JM: I first would like to read something about the origin of the Korean War, which just reached me in the past week, which I find very interesting as far as this issue of credibility is concerned.

LC: Can you give us the citation in addition to reading it?

JM: Yes. This is a statement by Kathryn Weathersby of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington in a symposium on the Korean War. She says, a quote, "The partial opening of Russian archives since the collapse of the Soviet Union has enabled historians to answer key questions about the origin of the Korean War. The decision for war in Korea was indeed made by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Stalin at first refused to approve the request of the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung to invade South Korea until January 1950 because of the presence of U.S. forces in Korea, the inferiority of the North Korean army, and the possibility of negative political repercussions. However, in April 1950, Stalin explained that the changed international situation made it possible to support the North Korean request. He stated that information coming from the United States confirmed that the prevailing mood is not to interfere. He was referring to NSC-48, a policy statement which defined the American defense perimeter in the Pacific as a line running just to the west of Japan and the Philippines, excluding the Korean peninsula and which was the basis for Secretary of State Dean Acheson's famous speech at the National Press Club on January twelfth." In other words—I finished the quotation from her. In other words, Stalin had come to believe that we would not react if the North Korean communists moved against South Korea. Interestingly as that war progressed, Truman, who had made a very courageous decision to respond to that invasion, found that in the stalemate which developed, he could not arrive at a satisfactory end to the war in negotiations with the North Koreans and the Chinese communists who had entered it in their support. When President Eisenhower was elected in November 1952, he very soon dropped a hint that unless those negotiations could be brought to a satisfactory conclusion, he might consider using the nuclear bomb. That threat proved quite credible because of Eisenhower's past. Within a little more than six months, that war had been brought to a conclusion satisfactory to us. Again, an example of the importance of credibility. Now I'm going to move onto President Reagan, who was president from 1981 until 1989. I mentioned the Iran Hostage Crisis, which President Carter proved completely unable to resolve because he had pursued such a soft policy toward the Soviet Union until Afghanistan came along. To his great surprise and in his naïveté, he said, "Oh, now I have to change." But it was too late then to restore his credibility. So the

hostages were held by the revolutionaries in Iran for many, many months without any resolution despite a feeble attempt through helicopters to rescue them in April 1980.

LC: Yes.

JM: However, when Reagan was elected president, on the very day he was inaugurated, because of his credibility, the Iranian government decided to release the hostages, on the very day of his inauguration. That, I think, is extremely interesting and significant. Then Reagan proceeded to step up the ante in the confrontation with the Soviet Union, which had been increasing its influence not only in Africa, but in Europe where it had installed theater nuclear missiles directed at Germany where our forces were stationed. There was great opposition within European countries and particularly in Germany to our installing a counter in the way of theater nuclear missiles, which are shorter-range missiles than intercontinental ones. Until the German government changed in 1983, the Socialists were succeeded by the Christian Democrats, and then the German government agreed with Reagan's push to install theater nuclear missiles in that country to counter the Soviets. Then Reagan brought up his possibility of anti-missile defense in the United States, which got characterized as "Star Wars." The Soviets decided that they could no longer compete because of their financial and economic situation. Within a few years, the Cold War was brought to a satisfactory end, again because of Reagan's action in restoring American credibility. However, during the Reagan administration there was a development, which again threatened our credibility. That occurred in Central America. Reagan supported the Nicaraguan Contras against the communist government that had been installed there in 1979. But eventually, his hands were tied by Congress, led by a Democratic congressman from Massachusetts by the name of Boland. Again, this time because of congressional actions, our credibility, which had been restored earlier by Reagan, was unfortunately again undermined in the eyes of our potential enemies. The result of that was, of course, the first Gulf War, since Saddam Hussein did not believe we would react against his invasion of Kuwait. Now I proceed to the Clinton administration, which after the restoration of our credibility through the first President Bush's action in the Gulf War, the Clinton administration again undermined the credibility of the use of our military power. First, it adopted a compromise with North Korea in 1994, which proved to be utterly fictitious because the North Koreans would not

adhere to their promise not to develop nuclear weapons. So that compromise proved to be totally ineffective. Then in the Iraq situation, in 1998 President Clinton declared that Saddam must go because he had thrown out the United Nations inspectors and that position was subsequently endorsed by Congress, but no effective action was taken to implement this policy statement. One of the greatest, perhaps the greatest of all actions that can undermine credibility is to issue a threat and then not take effective action to put it into effect. If no effective action is planned, better never to make the threat as far as credibility is concerned. So since no effective action was taken by the Clinton administration against Iraq despite its policy declaration, the second Gulf War resulted, again, because our credibility had been undermined earlier.

LC: Sir, did you have additional comments to make?

JM: Yes. I'm just turning my page.

LC: Okay. I'll allow you to do that. That's fine. Take your time.

JM: Now I come to the present Bush administration, which has succeeded in restoring our credibility of our military deterrent and our willingness to use it effectively. The best proof of that is that the Iraq war has produced a complete backdown by Libya from its intention to develop a nuclear—I can't think of the name—with nuclear weapons. That, I believe, is justification alone for the Iraq war, let alone the fact that Iraq posed a very serious threat to our national interests. We were forced to go to war for those reasons as well. Looking at other areas, Iran following our action in Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein, has also given some indication that it may be coming around to relinquishing its intentions to develop nuclear capabilities, but the final answer isn't in on that one yet. That, I think, is still pending, just as it is with North Korea and just as it is with the guerrilla war in Iraq. I think in all three of these cases, there may be a decision on the part of our adversaries to wait until after the Presidential election in November of this year in the United States to see whether it might get—to see whether they might get better terms if a Democrat is elected president.

LC: Sir, was there additional—

JM: Yes. I'm going to proceed now to my second major point, and that is why did we lose the war in Vietnam? I've just discussed what the consequences of the loss of that war were. I think it's extremely important to look at *why* we lost that war. We

pulled out of Vietnam, as all Americans know, because of the protraction of the conflict and the number of American casualties, which destroyed the political will to continue in Vietnam, forcing our government to pull our troops out. Why did we get into that position? In my view, it was because we chose the wrong strategy with which to fight the war. We followed a strategy of attrition and that meant that we thought if we could inflict enough casualties and damage on the enemy forces, they would be forced to the negotiating table and thus bring, we could bring the war to an end in that manner. However, this strategy could not win the war, because the enemy, the North Vietnamese communists, could always replace their losses with relative impunity through the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. We used airpower against that, but that could not be effective in any meaningful sense in dealing with the constant infiltration of men and supplies down that trail. The alternative political-military strategy, which we should have followed, was to set up a blocking line across the panhandle of Laos from the demilitarized so-called demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam across Laos, or to Savannakhet on the Mekong River. In order to set up this blocking line, we would have had to introduce American ground forces into Laos. Looking at the history of Laos in this situation in Southeast Asia, it is very significant that the last words of President Eisenhower, as he turned the presidency over to President John Kennedy in 1961, that Laos was the strategic key to Southeast Asia, which in my view, I am stating that I totally agree with. Eisenhower was a man of long experience having commanded, in this realm, having commanded the U.S. forces in Europe during World War II. It was he who pronounced Laos as the strategic key to Southeast Asia. In the summer of 1961, a crisis developed in Laos as to whether that country was going to fall under the control of neutralists and communists, or remain in the hands of a government which was friendly to the United States. President Kennedy proposed to send American military forces into Laos to support those who were our allies. When, however, he consulted the congressional leadership on this proposed action, Sam Rayburn, who was then the very powerful Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives replied, “I cannot support your sending American forces into Southeast Asia ten-thousand miles away from the United States, when you failed to back up the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba with American forces, and Cuba is only ninety miles off the coast of Florida.” Without this

kind of congressional support, Kennedy felt that he could not proceed with the action that he proposed. Instead, he opted for a Geneva, a conference in Geneva in Switzerland on Laos, an international conference with the aim of quote "neutralizing" close quote Laos. That was agreed to at this conference. The U.S. honored that commitment for the neutralization of Laos by failing to introduce ground forces into the country, but the North Vietnamese obviously never did with their constant use over a period of ten to twelve years of the Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltrating men and supplies into South Vietnam. Because of the long border of South Vietnam with Laos and Cambodia, it was impossible for our forces in Vietnam through an attrition strategy, as I've already said, to win. It fatally compromised the capability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves after we withdrew our forces. This alternative strategy was one that was also proposed by Gen. Bruce Palmer, who was a deputy commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam under General Abrams, who was the commander at some period between 1968 and 1972. Palmer has said that if we had set up this blocking line across Laos, we could have done it with no more forces than we actually introduced into Vietnam, and probably with substantially fewer casualties than were incurred in the war. Despite the fact that the war was prolonged because of the strategy that was followed by Presidents Kennedy and his successor, President Lyndon Johnson, they neither ever changed the overall strategy. Kennedy was actually a man who was inexperienced in the realm of foreign policy when he took over the presidency. He did not make, as Sam Rayburn said, the correct decision with respect to the Bay of Pigs. He didn't back up the invasion of Cuba with U.S. forces. In the meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna two or three months later, Khrushchev walked all over him, as Kennedy had not had the experience of dealing with a man like that. Within a couple of months, East Germany with Khrushchev's backing constructed the Berlin Wall, which changed the situation considerably in Europe with respect to East Germany. As a result of these weaknesses on Kennedy's part, Khrushchev decided to try to install nuclear missiles in Cuba. That turned out to be Kennedy's finest hour. He did deal with that crisis effectively, but it seems to me that that crisis, which was the most serious in the United States since the Civil War, since there was no certainty that the Soviet Union would not start dropping nuclear missiles on us, that crisis should never have been permitted to develop had Kennedy taken the correct decision with respect to

the Bay of Pigs a year-and-a-half earlier. What happened with respect to the Soviet attempt to install nuclear missiles in Cuba, also points up the importance of Reagan's action in backing the Contras against the communist government in Nicaragua in the 1980s. Because, again, we could have been faced with a renewed attempt by the Soviets to install nuclear missiles in another country in our hemisphere against us. Then I mentioned Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy. Johnson, as all Americans and particularly Texans know, was a taskmaster in dealing with domestic political matters, but he was out of his depth in dealing with international issues. As I said, he never changed the Kennedy policy on the sham neutralization of Laos. That fatally compromised the war in Vietnam as far as we were concerned. By the time Nixon took over in 1969, it was too late from the standpoint of politics in the United States to make this change. Nixon did attempt an invasion of Cambodia, which was also being used like Laos by the North Vietnamese effectively against us. But when Nixon did invade Cambodia, the political reaction in the United States was so intensely opposed that he was forced to withdraw after one month. So it was too late to change our overall strategy in Vietnam. The responsibility for our loss of the war in Vietnam, I attribute to four people: to Kennedy, to Johnson, to Averell Harriman, who was the one who pushed the sham neutralization of Laos with Kennedy, and to McNamara, who was the Secretary of Defense for so many years under both Kennedy and Johnson. That, Laura, presents my views on this important issue of the significance of the loss of the war in Vietnam and why we did lose it.

LC: Joe, would you be willing to take a couple of questions?

JM: Sure.

LC: Okay. I'm going to just begin from the beginning of your presentation, if that's okay.

JM: Yeah, sure.

LC: Rather than a set of chronological questions, and maybe we can handle those later.

JM: Right.

LC: First of all, in discussing the search for the causes of the war, you listed—I'm sorry, the search for the consequences of the war, you listed a number of geopolitical

consequences running all the way down, of course, to the present day. Primarily these consequences that you outlined involved Africa, Europe and, of course, the Middle East. But I wonder, can you talk about the consequences in Asia of the U.S. loss in Vietnam?

JM: The first consequence was that the North Vietnam communist regime decided to ally itself more closely with the Soviet Union and reached an agreement to permit the Soviets to use the big Cam Ranh naval base, which the Cam Ranh base was not just for navy, but for the ground forces as well, against us. Since that base from the South China Sea was close to the very strategically important petroleum roots from the Middle East to the Far East, that was a definite disadvantage for us in geopolitical terms. Interestingly, Laura—I'm going to make one other point, which I did not make in the presentation. We, the United States, was faced with a similar geopolitical situation in the war in Vietnam that it had been faced with in the Greek Civil War, from 1946 to 1948 between the communists in Greece and the anti-communist forces, who we were supporting through the Greek-Turkish aid program. The anti-communist forces could not bring that war to a successful conclusion as long as the communist forces in Greece could use Yugoslavia as a sanctuary and a base, which was immune to attack from [the opposing] forces. Not until Tito broke with Stalin in 1948 and changed the policy with respect to the Greek communists' use of Yugoslavia could the tide in that war be turned. In geopolitical terms, that is a very similar situation to the one that we were confronted with during the war in Vietnam. But unfortunately, there's not much in the way of historical memory in the United States government. So the lesson from the Greek war was lost when we got involved in Southeast Asia fifteen years later. Interestingly, it's not only the U.S. government, which fails to appreciate this lesson of history. The North Vietnamese, who should have known better, got involved in somewhat in an essentially similar situation in Cambodia from 1979 to 1989. They tried to control the political situation in Cambodia through their military intervention, but again they found that Thailand was used by their opponents in Cambodia, both as a sanctuary and as an avenue for supplies from the Chinese communists against the Vietnamese communists. Eventually Hanoi had to compromise the war in Vietnam—the war in Cambodia, excuse me—for geopolitical reasons essentially similar to why we lost the war in Vietnam. Interestingly, also, the same geopolitical situation prevailed in the Soviet war in

Afghanistan. Here again, there was an outside sanctuary, this time Pakistan, which would be used as a sanctuary for the anti-communist opposition, for the Afghan opposition forces when they were pushed by the Soviets and through which the supplies of armaments and materiel flowed to those forces. So in a geopolitical sense, nobody seems to learn very much, not only the Americans, but even our opponents. So nobody seems to pay sufficient attention to history, evidently.

LC: Yes. As you point out, no one has the market on making the right decisions all the time.

JM: Exactly. If one were to pursue that point that you have made, one could also examine Hitler's errors during World War II. He made many brilliant decisions, but he also made some grievous errors.

LC: Yes, Joe. I agree with you very much. I've made some study of that as well, and yes, I agree. I wonder if you can talk in general terms about the American relationship with China, vis-à-vis the conflict in Vietnam?

JM: Yes. On that one, the Chinese communist regime was just as opposed to the United States as the Soviets, even after the rift between those two communist powers developed and expanded in the 1960s. The Chinese communists furnished aid and assistance to the North Vietnamese just as the Soviets did. The Chinese communists also permitted Soviet aid to pass in part through their territory to reach the North Vietnamese. Some of it came by sea and was landed at Haiphong in North Vietnam. But despite the big rift between them, they acted with the same objective in mind as far as the United States and Vietnam works. Now that is to force us out of Vietnam. An interesting point in that respect, I came across in the late 1970s, a statement by the Chinese communists. This was at the time of the brief Chinese communist-North Vietnamese communist war against each other. A statement by the Chinese communists ruing this decision by the North Vietnamese to attack them because the Chinese communists had said they had placed three hundred thousand troops, Chinese communist troops, in North Vietnam in order to enable North Vietnam to send its forces into South Vietnam. Now I've never seen that point widely made. I remember coming across this statement in the press by a Chinese communist leader. Have you ever come across this at all?

LC: Yes. There was a white paper that was published by the Chinese government in 1979 at the time of the conflict that reviewed the course of official relationships between the two communist governments, China and Vietnam, that outlined the program of aid, up to and including the deployment of a significant number—if three hundred thousand is the number you remember, I'm sure that's accurate—into North Vietnam. Yes.

JM: Well, then, I'm very interested in that. Thank you very much.

LC: Yes. Actually I could probably find a copy of that. It was monitored—that statement was made over Xinhua, the official Chinese news outlet and was monitored by both the British and American monitoring services and was published in their records. I may be able to find a copy of that.

JM: I would appreciate it very much.

LC: Ok, sure. The Chinese angle to the war, of course, is often introduced as the reason that the United States didn't introduce further ground troops into other countries besides Vietnam.

JM: Excuse me. I can't hear you very well.

LC: Oh, okay. I was going to say that the relationship with China and fear about boiling over Chinese involvement in the war was cited during the 1960s as a limiting factor on what the United States could actually do militarily in Vietnam.

JM: Because of the Chinese communists in action during the Korean War and coming to the assistance of the North Korean Communists when we moved to the border of Korea with China, we did not want to introduce American ground troops into North Vietnam because we were afraid that the Chinese communists' action would be repeated. So we always felt we were totally tied by that precedent as far as introducing any American forces into North, American ground forces in North Vietnam were concerned.

LC: In your view, was that particular selective use of historical memory a good exercise?

JM: I think so, probably. Particularly in view of the fact that it has now become known that the Chinese communists had put so many of their own troops into North Vietnam. So I think that was a wise move on our part. That's the reason I am not an

advocate of direct ground force action against North Vietnam. I think we could have used airpower more effectively.

LC: How could we have done that, Joe?

JM: Well, the on-and-off-again use by the Johnson presidency produced not only ineffective results, it produced the opposite result of what we were trying to achieve. It was only when Nixon decided to bomb Hanoi and to drop mines to close Haiphong Harbor at Christmas 1972 that the North Vietnamese were finally induced to sign the agreement which enabled us to bring our—an agreement satisfactory to us, particularly as far as prisoners of war were concerned, which concluded our direct role in the war in Vietnam.

LC: Yes.

JM: We used airpower, but most of the time we didn't use it effectively.

LC: Okay. I think—

JM: But I do not think we could have won the war solely by the use of airpower against North Vietnam.

LC: That's a question I think we could return to.

JM: Excuse me. I still can't hear you.

LC: I'm sorry, Joe, is that better? Can you hear me now?

JM: Yes.

LC: Okay. That's a question, the question of airpower, that we might return to later. I wonder, following again on the presentation that you gave, if I could ask another question. This one has to do with your reference to the Reagan administration policies in Central America.

JM: Yes.

LC: You pointed out that President Reagan supported supplying military equipment to the Contras in Nicaragua, but that his hands were tied by Congress and particularly by the Boland amendment. I wonder if you see that intervention by Congress as a follow-on to the, and as a reaction against what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, where Congress gave basically carte blanche to the president to introduce military troops into another—

JM: Yeah. I suppose, yes, that that had some influence on that decision. Certainly the whole atmosphere of congressional sentiment, particularly on the part of the Democrats from, oh, the late 1960s on into the 1980s helped to produce this Democratic sentiment in the 1980s as far as the aid to the Contras was concerned.

LC: Can you name, if you can recall, some of the Democratic congressmen and senators who were most closely associated with that effort? Are there particular names that come to mind?

JM: Well, certainly Senator Church of Idaho was one. He has certainly helped to destroy the effectiveness of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) through his investigations in the early 1970s. I think Senator Kennedy has been very consistent in his position over the years, which I think has helped to undermine U.S. credibility over several decades. I'm trying to think. There were so many. Senator McGovern's campaign for the presidency in 1972 is certainly one of the foremost examples of that.

LC: What about someone like Senator Fulbright, for example?

JM: Oh, yes. Fulbright also.

LC: Okay. He sort of falls in that same kind of group?

JM: Yes, right. Fulbright, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, certainly bears considerable responsibility. Yes. You're absolutely correct. On the other hand, there were senate Democrats who played a very respectable role in opposing it. One was old Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

LC: What sort of role did he play? Was there a particular time that you remember him being influential?

JM: Well, I think he was generally supportive of the war in Vietnam, even I believe right up to the end. I can also remember your—the congressman from your area, Representative Mahon who was—is that the way you pronounce his name?

LC: Yes, I believe so. Yes.

JM: Yeah. Who was chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and continued to be an effective supporter of U.S. military action.

LC: What about Rayburn, whom you mentioned earlier? Can you speak a bit more about his stance on U.S. military capabilities?

JM: I think Rayburn was very much a supporter of the U.S. military. Rayburn, as I recall, died early in the 1960s.

LC: Yes.

JM: So that he did not play very much of a role in Vietnam, except for this question of sending troops into Laos, where he made a pretty valid point, which demonstrates that history is a continuum. You can't take one foreign policy decision in isolation and avoid the consequences of it.

LC: Yes, Joe. I think that's right. I think the discourse that you've given this morning illustrates the ways in which that's not a good idea. I want to ask you a little bit about Bay of Pigs.

JM: About—excuse me?

LC: About the Bay of Pigs invasion and the plans for it. Can you talk about Kennedy's failure to make the right decision?

JM: Well, Kennedy did not back up the U.S.-supported and armed invasion of Cuba by anti-Castro-ites with either airpower or ground troops. I'm not sure that airpower alone would have been effective in dealing with this matter, but the use of ground forces could have been. Now it certainly would have put—if we had done that, it would have produced a considerable hullabaloo, probably, compared with the kind that Bush now faces, has faced over the Iraq war, certainly in Latin America. But as I indicated the failure at that time to take effective action produced the greatest crisis in the U.S. since the Civil War. Had Kennedy's position during the election campaign in 1960 that the Soviets had a margin over us in terms of intercontinental missiles, had that proved to have been correct instead of wrong—and incidentally, that may have been the position that elected him to the presidency in that narrow election with about a hundred thousand votes separating him and Nixon—had that position not proved to be wrong, Khrushchev probably would never have backed down in 1962.

LC: Yes. I would agree with that, sir. I wonder if you think that President Eisenhower was in the right in allowing the planning for the proposed invasion of Cuba to go forward? Was that in its initial stages?

JM: Well, in view of subsequent history, I would say yes because the Cuban missile crisis was the most dire result of Castro's taking over in Cuba, but we continue to

have problems over the next several decades, really until the Cold War was brought to an end. Now Castro is a nuisance, but he's not a great threat.

LC: Right. But for many years, he has actively fomented communist insurgencies in Africa and elsewhere?

JM: That's right. That's right. He supported the Angolans in—with the Angolans, and I think he had troops in Ethiopia as well, as I recall, or was it Mozambique?

LC: I believe it was Mozambique.

JM: Yeah, Mozambique.

LC: But you're on the right track, and I think I agree with you, sir. Was Kennedy correct? Did he make a good decision in firing the head of the CIA, Allen Dulles, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco?

JM: Well, that's a difficult one, Laura.

LC: Yes.

JM: I think these decisions are made not only in terms of international effect, but also for domestic political reasons, and certainly for the latter I suppose Kennedy felt he had to take that decision.

LC: Did you know Allen Dulles?

JM: I met him. I can't say I knew him well. Actually, I met him at my first post in Istanbul. He was then in the private sector. He came through Istanbul on his way to Iran, where he was undertaking some private sector mission, and wanted a briefing on the Turkish economy, which I gave him.

LC: What year would that have been, sir?

JM: That must have been in, I think 1947. That was the only time I ever met Allen Dulles.

LC: Okay.

JM: I'll take that back. Allen Dulles was also present at a dinner which Prince Sihanouk, the longtime leader, actual or nominal, of Cambodia made his first and perhaps only visit to Washington in 1958. I then was the Vietnam desk officer in the State Department and for several weeks also the Cambodia desk officer between the departure of one Cambodian desk officer and his successor. When Sihanouk gave a dinner at the

Cambodian Embassy in honor of John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles was also present at that dinner and my wife and I were also. So I had that second social contact.

LC: Sir, can you give your impression of Sihanouk that night?

JM: Excuse me again, Laura. I can't hear you.

LC: Your impressions of President Sihanouk?

JM: Oh, Sihanouk is in a way a brilliant individual, but one of the most mercurial leaders in the world. I came to feel that in the early 1960s that we should have cut off our aid. Actually, we never did cut off our aid to Cambodia. He was the one who made the decision to reject U.S. aid in, I think, 1964. Sihanouk, of course, was the man who of permitted the North Vietnamese to use Cambodian soil as a sanctuary and as a route of infiltration of men and supplies. He could not—in real sense he probably could not have done a great deal about it. Actually, when we started the so-called secret bombing of Cambodia, he also put up with that for the same reason. It wasn't he who revealed it, as a matter of fact. It was the American opponents of the action by our own government. So he did not have a strong hand at that time in Cambodia in the late 1960s, obviously, because North Vietnamese were much stronger than he was. He tried to play that hand from the Cambodian standpoint effectively and then, of course, he was overthrown and the Lon Nol government was more openly friendly toward us. We thought we could invade Cambodia then without official opposition, which Sihanouk probably would have put forth as his public position if forced to. Lon Nol permitted us to come in, but it was American opposition, which forced—political opposition, which forced Nixon to reverse himself.

LC: Do you remember that evening at the Cambodian Embassy very well?

JM: Oh, yes, because we have a picture from I guess *Newsweek* of the subsequent of the dinner, when Sihanouk had one of his children and some other Cambodian classical dancers put on a performance. My wife was seated in that picture right next to Allen Dulles. I am not in the picture, she is. But interestingly, we were obviously then stationed in Washington. We had three very young children, no domestic help, and my wife said, here she was at this very elegant party the night before and the next morning she was scrubbing the kitchen floor on her hands and knees.

LC: Yes. That's quite a bit to adjust to. Sir, I wonder if I can ask you one more rather large question. In your presentation you talked about the failures of the attrition strategy. The one name that you didn't mention who is very closely associated with the operationalization of that strategy is General Westmoreland. I wonder if you can just give your general appraisal of his command in Vietnam?

JM: I'll be glad to. I do not have a very high regard for General Westmoreland's handling of the military situation in Vietnam. I don't think that the policies and course he pursued were very effective. On the other hand, I have the highest regard for his successor, General Abrams, who was much more successful from a military standpoint, but unfortunately was handicapped by the constant decline in political support within the United States, both in Congress and among the population. But I think Abrams was a much more effective commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam than General Westmoreland.

LC: Did you have occasion to meet General Westmoreland?

JM: Very briefly. I met him. I was again on the Vietnam desk at the time he was appointed to command the U.S. forces in Vietnam. I met him very briefly. That was my only contact with him. I subsequently did meet General Abrams on a visit to Vietnam in the late 1960s and was impressed by him personally, but I'm talking about a general assessment of his four years there. Four years or more, yeah maybe he was even there before he took over as commander, as deputy.

LC: Yes. Yes. He had been deputy to Westmoreland. Sir, let's take a break for a moment.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [2] of [57]
Date: April 14, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the fourteenth of April 2004. I again am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Mendenhall is in Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, I want to begin by just asking about your youth. Where did you go to high school, sir?

JM: I went to a small, rural high school in Calvert, Maryland, which is in the northeastern corner of the state about a mile from Pennsylvania and about seven or eight miles from Delaware.

LC: Sir, were you a good student?

JM: Yes. I was. I'm not sure how much that counted since there were only fourteen in our graduating class, but I was the head of the class academically.

LC: That is rather small. Now did you, in addition to studying, play any sports or have any jobs at that time?

JM: Well, I had to work on the farm night and morning before and after going to school. My father was a farmer. From the age of nine, I had to begin to help out on the farm. So that was my job, and in the summer I had to work on the farm as well, of course.

LC: Now what did your father grow? How big was the farm?

JM: Well, it was essentially a dairy farm of about twenty-five cows. The farm had about a hundred and sixty acres. In addition to the production of milk, some crops were sold for sale, such as wheat. Corn was produced to feed the cows, as well as hay, of course.

LC: Did you have any siblings?

JM: I had and still have one sister.

LC: Okay. What's her name?

JM: Miriam.

LC: Your father's name?

JM: Also Joseph, but his middle initial was E and my middle initial is A. So I'm not a junior.

LC: What was his middle name?

JM: Edwin.

LC: Was that a family name?

JM: Yes, it was.

LC: Tell me about—

JM: My middle name was based on my grandfather's name.

LC: What is your middle name, sir? I don't actually—

JM: Abraham.

LC: Okay. What about your mother? Tell me something about her. First of all, her name and her background.

JM: Well, she was born Miriam Alice Brown, also on a farm about, oh, a mile or two from where my father was also born on a farm. She was the second of five children in that family. Interestingly, her father was twenty years older than her mother and died in 1918, whereas her mother lived on until 1965, died at the age of ninety-two. Laura, I might mention one thing of family interest.

LC: Sure. Of course.

JM: On both sides of my family, both my mother's side and my father's side, at one point there were five generations living at the same time, which means that people tended to marry early in our family and our families. My mother and father were actually nineteen when they were married.

LC: Your mother and father had probably known each other, then, all that time.

JM: They went to school together. Actually, my father did not graduate from high school, but my mother did.

LC: That's interesting. My parents are exactly the same. They had known each other all that time. My father did not graduate from high school and my mother did. Let me ask you about your grandfather who died in 1918. Did he die in the flu epidemic?

JM: No. He died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-five. Actually, on my father's side, his mother's brother—that is his uncle—did die of the flu in 1918.

LC: Is that right?

JM: The flu was quite rampant in that rural area. I remember hearing my folks talk about people who succumbed to it at that time.

LC: Can you tell me whether the farm that your father and mother had was family land? Had that been owned in the family?

JM: No. My grandfather Mendenhall's farm was right next door to the farm, which my father bought when he and my mother married, partly through a loan from his father. They were adjacent farms. Then my father was the second son in the family. The older son had a farm on the other side, but those two farms had not been in the family. They were bought when the sons married.

LC: I see.

JM: My grandfather's farm was actually larger. It was 260 acres, which was a large farm for that area of Maryland at that time. I might say that that area of Maryland was more like Pennsylvania than the eastern shore of Maryland. The eastern shore of Maryland tends to be very flat and often sandy, whereas the area in which I was born so close to Pennsylvania was hilly and rolling country, moderately hilly and rolling and much more like the adjacent areas of Pennsylvania.

LC: Was your sister older than you?

JM: No. She was young. She was four years younger.

LC: Okay. So really the chores of the family did fall on your shoulders as a youngster.

JM: Well, I guess the harder worker was my father, but I had to pitch in at an early age.

LC: Sure. Did you have any time for sports or other pursuits, music or anything like that?

JM: Not particularly, no. My great interest from the age of eleven on was the movies.

LC: Is that right?

JM: Which I suppose was an escape for me from the drudgery of the farm. I'm not one who romanticizes farm work at all. I couldn't wait to get away from it, as a matter of fact. The movies were a real escape for me.

LC: Now where did you go to see films?

JM: [At] the town of Oxford, Pennsylvania, mainly, which was about ten miles away.

LC: How did you get over there?

JM: Well, my family often went to that town on Saturday nights, and I would go to the movies, that starting in 1931 when I was eleven. Then a few years later beginning in 1935, my father used to go every Tuesday night to an auction sale for livestock to a small village about a mile from Oxford. I would go on with my mother and sister to the movies. So then I would go generally twice a week from then on.

LC: Joe, how much did it cost to go to a film in those days?

JM: Well, for those under twelve, ten cents. For those over twelve, twenty-five cents. I may add, Laura, that at that juncture, even a penny was considered very important. During the summer, for example, I would several days a week go to neighboring towns, first with somebody else driving our pickup truck and then when I was sixteen and got my driver's license with myself doing it, peddling from house to house potatoes and sweet corn raised on our farm. If our sweet corn was a cent higher than somebody else's, it wouldn't be bought. If the potatoes were a nickel a bushel difference—a bushel being sixty pounds—they wouldn't be bought. That's how important money was to people at that stage during the Depression.

LC: Can you tell me whether and in what ways the Depression affected you?

JM: Well, I can certainly tell you one way. My grandfather, in addition to being a farmer, which was certainly his life's work, also became director of a small bank in a town in Elkton, Maryland. All of the family had accounts in that. I at the age of I guess it would have been twelve, had about some ninety dollars in it when the bank failed and I lost virtually all the savings, which I had accumulated up to the age of twelve. Never did get it back from the bank. My grandfather, who had worked hard all his life found as a director that he had to mortgage his farm and make financial contributions to the bank. He was held responsible as well as other directors for the failure of the bank. That meant

that he from then on, even though he was in his sixties he worked himself to death. This was in 1933, the bank failed, and he died of a heart attack in 1938.

LC: You were moving toward college at that time? Was it always—

JM: Well, they say moving toward. The decision to go to college came the summer after I graduated from high school.

LC: Okay.

JM: My father was not in favor of my going to college. He wanted me to be on the farm. His will usually prevailed in the family, but this time my mother who did feel that I should go on to college in view of what I had done in high school, managed to prevail on that issue.

LC: So it was not always thought that you would go on to college?

JM: No, not at all. Not until the summer of 1936 when I graduated from high school at the age of sixteen. I might add that I graduated from high school early because at that time, the state of Maryland had only eleven years of elementary and high school. Almost all other states had twelve years. I started school when I was about five-and-a-half and therefore I graduated from high school at the age of sixteen because there were only eleven grades to go through. Then I also graduated college at the age of twenty, which is also young.

LC: Yes, very young. Your mother's influence in just making the decision that you ought to go to college. Where did that come from, do you think?

JM: Well, she had done well in high school herself. Actually, she started to attend a teacher's college after she graduated from high school, but became so homesick after a few weeks she returned home and started teaching in a little one-room school with seven grades in that one room. I suppose I can only guess at the number of students. I imagine maybe there were twenty or thirty students in the seven grades, which was in walking distance of the farm on which she lived. She walked to teach there. She'd only taught for a few months before she and my father were married. She did not continue teaching after then because she also had, in addition to housework, had to work on the farm.

LC: Right. Yeah, that was the family business, really. How did you decide where to go to college?

JM: The decision was easy because the family could not afford to send me to live at college, and the only one that was within commuting distance was the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware, which was only about ten miles from home.

LC: What did you find when you went to college in terms of the curriculum? What did you find most interesting, and what did you do best at?

JM: Well, at first let me tell you. I took the—at that point, during so-called "freshman week," the entering class was given a whole series of examinations. One was in French, of which I had two years in college. I was summoned in by the head of the modern—the professor who was the head of the modern languages department after he saw my test, and said, "You have done so well on this test, we are proposing to have you skip the French course which is normally given to those who have had two years of high school French and move you on to the next higher course." He said, "You must have had a French lady as your teacher in high school." I said, "I not only did not have a French lady, I don't think she's ever even been in France. She's never been outside the United States, but she was a good teacher." That enabled me to do—I was the only one who was in this position of being able to skip the first year of college French. I did far better than those who had gone to the big urban high schools in Wilmington, Delaware, the principle city in that state.

LC: Sure.

JM: I also took tests in various other areas. It turned out that I—I majored in history in college and minored in French. The professors I had—Delaware was a very small institution at that juncture. There were only nine hundred students in all. Five hundred in the men's college and four hundred in the women's college. I note that difference because at that particular point, the two colleges were totally separate. The only thing that connected them was the library between the two campuses, which both shared. During my first two years at Delaware, there were no shared classes with the ladies from the women's college. Only in my junior year did the policy of the university begin to change and a few small upper classes were then integrated in gender terms.

LC: Just a couple of classes though at the beginning?

JM: Just a few. None of the larger classes. I remember I had a course, a survey of French literature in my junior year. I think there were, oh, five or six of us in that

course. Two or three men and two or three women. I don't believe that any of my other courses in my junior year or even my senior year except for another course in French literature were integrated.

LC: How did the male and female students get along once they were in the same classes? Was there some tension there?

JM: Well, just fine. I didn't denote any particular difference in either conduct of either the professors or the students.

LC: Interesting. So it was just kind of taken in stride?

JM: Yeah. Of course, the colleges were so adjacent to each other, there had been some intermingling, obviously, socially prior to that time.

LC: Oh, sure. I just wondered if in the classroom it was apparent that maybe there was some tension.

JM: No, I don't. I never felt that.

LC: Okay. So you majored in history?

JM: Yeah, majored in history, minored in French. I also had quite a number of credit hours in economics.

LC: Were there particular professors who influenced you?

JM: Absolutely. The two or three—there were about three professors who had a lasting impact on me in college. The one who had the greatest influence was an associate professor of history. In this small institution I took over the four years, three full-year courses with him. For the first one in my freshman year was a survey of European history and then in my junior year a survey of English history, and in my senior year, half a year of Medieval history and half a year of Renaissance history. He was a very dynamic individual. He inspired his students to—I still look up to him as the greatest influence of any member of the academic profession on my life. The second was the head of the Department of Modern Languages, whom I mentioned earlier, with whom I had two courses in French over the four years. I had other courses with other members of his department. He likewise took a special interest in me and I was greatly influenced by him, and the third was the head of the economics department. Those three I think had very considerable influence. I'll just interject, Laura—

LC: Please.

JM: Two of my daughters, two of my three daughters went to Harvard. I maintain that I got as good an education at this small state institution, the University of Delaware, as they got at Harvard. I'm not sure they will subscribe to the same conclusion, but I feel that way. Not that all of our professors were first-rate at Delaware. The ones I mentioned certainly were. There were others who I thought were in my view, rather substandard and certainly had no lasting influence on me. But, of course, at a place like Harvard, many of the courses particularly for undergraduates are not taught by the better-known members of the academic profession but by graduate students.

LC: Yes, absolutely.

JM: So, I think I came out as well as two of my three daughters did at this very expensive institution, Harvard.

LC: Joe, just for the record, can you name those professors?

JM: Yes. I'd be glad to.

LC: That would good.

JM: One was Dr. Francis H. Squire, who was about thirty-six years old when I entered the University of Delaware in 1936.

LC: Now he was the historian?

JM: He was associate professor of history, yes. He came, I think, from New Hampshire, and spent all of his academic career I believe at the University of Delaware. He eventually became a Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, liberal arts section, and unfortunately died of a heart attack in 1956. I continued even subsequently to maintain close contact with his widow right up until the time that she in the 1990s, when she had to enter an institute, a nursing home because she was gradually beginning to suffer from Alzheimer's disease. She and I remained close throughout the rest of her life.

LC: That sounds like a wonderful relationship.

JM: Yes. I also—the professor of modern languages, Dr. Edwin C. Byams came from Massachusetts, had spent some time in France. I don't believe it was too long, but he spoke French absolutely fluently. He was told in the 1930s by the president of the university, he did not have his doctorate then, that he could be only acting head of the department until he got his doctorate. He did receive that I think shortly after I entered Delaware, and then he was named the full head of the Department of Modern Languages.

There were three languages then taught at Delaware, French, German, and Spanish, in addition to Latin and Greek. This is interesting, Laura. Latin and Greek, when—I arrived at Delaware not having any Latin of Greek because in my small three-teacher rural high school, it was no longer taught. But since I was taking the pre-law course, Latin was a requirement. So I had to take first-year Latin. The president of the university—I think I took it with about five other students. The president of the university decided that since Latin was normally taught in high school, not in my little rural one, that we wouldn't get any credit for it. So I had to take that course completely without credit. I then took three years of Latin. But what I wanted to point out was that in the first two years I took Latin, it was taught by an old gentleman who had been at Delaware since 1895.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Professor Elisha Conover. He was a very distinguished-looking old gentleman with beautiful wavy gray hair. But unfortunately, in his 70s then and unfortunately as he put it, he would say to the class at various stages, "It used to be when I had thirty students in an entering class, the second day I knew all of them by names. Now I have six of you and I can't remember your names after several months." He did retire after a couple of years, but he was a wonderful old fellow.

LC: Did you find that that Latin instruction formed a good basis for your further study later of French?

JM: Well, I had had French before, actually.

LC: Oh, I'm sorry.

JM: I had two years in high school. So the process is really reversed. I knew French much better than Latin. The French had stuck with me much better than the Latin did. I subsequently—which you'll find out later in interviewing me—lived in Italy for seventeen years in retirement where I learned Italian. I can't say that I remembered enough Latin that it helped me with Italian. The knowledge of French definitely did help with Italian.

LC: Sir, you graduated from Delaware in 1940, is that correct?

JM: That's correct.

LC: Okay. Upon graduation, what plans did you have?

JM: Well, now, as I indicated I had taken the pre-law course, I thought I would go to high school. I applied during my senior year. Since I needed financial assistance in order to be able to do it, I applied to I think about nine different law schools and also applied at the same time for financial assistance. Interestingly, the one that answered first to my great surprise was Harvard. They were affirmative on both scores, so it didn't take me very long to make the decision that that's where I would start to law school.

LC: What motivated you to reach so high as to apply to Harvard?

JM: Well, I think I—I'm trying to remember the ones I applied to. I applied to Harvard, Yale, a number of smaller ones, Dickinson in Pennsylvania. I can't remember all of them by any means, but I scattered my shots, so to speak. There seemed to be no reason not to try, even if—you never know whether you'll succeed until you do try. So I tried both the most prestigious ones as well as the smaller ones in case the former didn't work out.

LC: Was attending law school part of your overall plan to not be on the farm for the rest of your life?

JM: Yes.

LC: Okay. Did you have it in mind that you would practice law? Or did you want to teach?

JM: Well, you know, at that stage of life, one's thoughts about the future are not quite as concrete as one would think later. I assumed that I would practice law at that stage, although I had no definite idea whether it'd be law or whether it'd be practice of law or going into the academic profession or even a government job. But I think I probably assumed I would be practicing law because at that time I think I thought that was probably the most remunerative of all.

LC: Yes. Joe, how much attention were you paying to world events at this time, 1939 to 1940?

JM: Well, because of my interest in history, I was very definitely following what was going on particularly in Europe as the threat of Nazi Germany grew more ominous. I, however, was very much an isolationist until the spring of 1940 this to the consternation of my professor of modern languages. As a matter of fact, he deplored my isolationism. Then in the spring of 1940, when Hitler overran Holland in four days,

Belgium in just a short time longer and France in six weeks. That awakened my eyes—excuse me—to the great danger which a victory by the Nazis in Europe posed to the United States, and from then on I was very much a pronounced interventionist.

LC: How did you feel about Roosevelt?

JM: Again, I'll say that—well, I'll back up a little bit. When I was very young, my parents were very pronounced Democrats. But in the 1932 election, I at the age of twelve thought I should—and I voted for this in the high school mock election, I voted for Hoover, but my parents were for Roosevelt. But very shortly thereafter, I switched to become very much a liberal Democrat in support of Roosevelt both in his domestic policies and in his foreign policy. I may as well say at this point that I remained very much a strong Democratic supporter until the 1960s, when my views gradually shifted mainly because the Democrats had taken us into the war in Vietnam. I thought quite properly in view of its consistency with what he had been doing in the Cold War ever since the end of World War II, and then in the late '60s, began to abandon Vietnam. I voted for Democrats for president through Lyndon Johnson in 1964, although there I cast my vote somewhat reluctantly for him. But in 1968, I switched to supporting Nixon and from then on supported Republicans for foreign policy reasons and increasingly for domestic policy reasons. There you've got my politics.

LC: Yes. Well, I'm making notes so that I'm sure to ask you again about that moment in 1968 when you changed your thinking and your allegiances. I will want to of course ask you about President Nixon later on. Your sense though in the late'30s and into the spring of 1940 was that Roosevelt was pursuing the correct path with regard to events in Europe?

JM: Well, he was pursuing the only path then that seemed to be politically feasible from the domestic standpoint. He had tried in 1937 with his so-called "Quarantine Speech" to take a more prominent role in what was happening in Europe. The reaction to that had been so adverse that he pulled in his horns. The U.S. was then subject to the so-called "Neutrality Act," which actually forbade us as I recall to sell arms to either side in a conflict. That I now feel was a very unfortunate piece of legislation, but it shows what hysteria in the political sense can do in leading the U.S. in the wrong direction, policy-wise. In the mid-30s, there was a great outcry that munitions

manufacturers had carried us into World War I, and that therefore we should try to remain neutral in any future conflicts so as not to be influenced by these money-seekers. That led to the adoption of the Neutrality Act at some point in the mid-30s, and that's what had to govern Roosevelt's actions until he began to try to find loose ways around it if he could in the 1940s after the precipitous fall of France. The first concrete act of that sort I think was the Destroyer-for-Bases-Deal in the fall of 1940. I think it was September when Roosevelt decided to provide sixty of our destroyers to Britain, which was alone and severely threatened by Nazi Germany then in return for bases in the Caribbean.

LC: That looked to you like pretty good policy making?

JM: Yes. By that time I had changed my own views and I was thoroughly in favor of it. Then, of course, the following year, the Lend-Lease Act was adopted.

LC: That's right. Joe—

JM: I don't recall whether the Neutrality Act was specifically repealed, but it certainly was in effect repealed by these actions.

LC: Yes. The executive branch found a way to make its will—

JM: Which were not easy to adopt, because the Republicans at that point were still mainly isolationists and the Democrats were in control of the legislature and managed to get these provisions. You know there were a lot of Democratic isolationists, as well.

LC: Yes. That's right, yes. It was very hard I think for congressional leaders to as it were, get over the hump in terms of thinking about foreign policy and American commitments. Joe, tell me about your time at Harvard Law School. What was it like to be up in Cambridge?

JM: Well, I found—let me say first. This is the first time I had really lived away from home, since I had indicated I commuted to college the four years I was there. I suppose like everybody else, I found it going through a bit of a difficult experience adapting to living away from home. Actually, it served me in good stead later when I entered the Army, because I had had a year of living away from home before. Most of the soldiers who were conscripted into the Army had not had that experience and had to go through it when they went into the Army, which made it doubly difficult for them. I

also found in law school that I in a sense didn't find the same interest that I had found in college, where particularly in the field of history, one was dealing with big issues of great importance. Whereas in law, I found that you could often be faced with questions, "Was this horse Mr. A's or Mr. B's?" which didn't seem of much consequence in a grand sense. It certainly was to those two individuals, just to cite that as an example. The law often deals with small, individual matters probably more often than it deals with grand matters, though it's the grand ones which tend to get the press play, of course. So I did not find the study of law nearly as interesting as I had found particularly my later years at college. I wasn't sure at the end of the first year that I really wanted to return to law school until I received my grades. I found that I ranked 39th in a class of some 440 at Harvard, which put me in the upper tenth. I figured on that basis I probably ought to proceed with law school. That was my intention, to go on to the second year of law school in the fall.

LC: Were you at that point assured that you would have continuing financial support from Harvard?

JM: I believe so. Otherwise, I couldn't have done it. I must have been assured of that.

LC: Okay. So that was your plan, but the plan was interrupted?

JM: The plan was interrupted because I turned twenty-one in January 1941. The second registration for the draft for those twenty-one and older occurred on July 1, 1941. I registered for the draft and I figured that—and then there was a, people were called into the armed forces on the basis of a lottery selection of the draft numbers assigned. I figured that the chances were that I'd be able to go back for a second year of law school, that my number wouldn't turn up that fast according to the law of averages. But to my great surprise, a little more than a month later, I got my summons to come in for a physical to prepare for conscription in the Army. By October, I was in the Army. Two months before Pearl Harbor, drafted into the Army as a buck private.

LC: Joe, how did you cope with this abrupt and fairly unexpected change to your plan?

JM: Well, I was sorry that I couldn't go on for the second year of law school. Actually some student deferments were being given at that point, but as I indicated, I

lived in Maryland. I registered for the draft in Cecil County, Maryland, but my post office address was Nottingham, Pennsylvania. The postal system was a federal system. Even though our farm was in Maryland, our post office address was Nottingham, Pennsylvania. I put that down as my address and turned out my draft papers were sent by Maryland to Pennsylvania because of the postal address. My father probably could have influenced the draft board in Maryland to defer me as a student, but he did not have that influence in Pennsylvania. So I also tried at that stage to see whether I could get a commission in any branch of the armed services, but it was too late. That was not possible. So I resigned myself to being drafted partly because I felt that sooner or later, we would be in the war anyway.

LC: Yes.

JM: So then I may as well go in at that stage, and I did.

LC: You went to basic training then in the fall of 19—

JM: Yeah, in the fall of '41 I was inducted at Camp Meade, Maryland. I stayed there for four days and then was shipped with a trainload of new inductees to Camp Wheeler, Georgia, which was an infantry basic training center. Basic training was then either twelve or sixteen weeks. I think sixteen. But after eight weeks of basic training, Pearl Harbor occurred. I might pause here to indicate that my judgment is certainly not always correct in foreign affairs. On Sunday, December 7, 1941, I was sitting in I guess a little library in Camp Wheeler, Georgia, writing friends. I had just written that I did not think that war with Japan was going to take place, at least not imminent, when the news came over the radio. It was either 1:30 or 2:30 PM Eastern Standard Time then, about the attack on Pearl Harbor. That, of course, changed everything as far as America was concerned. Within a week after that, I might even say that night, we were put on guard duty with rifles with live ammunition for the first time at Camp Wheeler, Georgia.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Within a week, seventeen hundred of us in basic infantry training were put on a train and shipped to Drew Field, Florida, which is near Tampa. We were being assigned to a newly created signal aircraft warning service because the authorities in Washington felt that there was danger of air attack to the United States as well as to our friends in Latin America and, of course, to any bases which we had not yet established

abroad but which we would establish. So this service was newly created and we seventeen hundred were I suppose part of the nucleus of that. We arrived in Drew Field to find that we had tents in a swamp. That's where we were barracked for a number of weeks. Then proceeded to start training in radio communications and maintenance, because if signal aircraft warning posts were going to be established around the periphery of the U.S., they had to be able to communicate with central points.

LC: Tell me a little bit about that training. Can you if you remember?

JM: Well, it was pretty sporadic and rudimentary at Drew Field. There was considerable confusion and not really very effective training for a few weeks when all of a sudden in February, which was about two months after we had gotten to Drew Field, a trainload of us were shipped to Fort Dix, New Jersey, with preparatory to assignment overseas. We had no idea where. Again, we continued with sporadic training in Fort Dix for four or five weeks, again not very effective training. Then all of us went back to these camps in Florida from which we had come. We learned on the train on the way back that we had been sent to Fort Dix to be shipped abroad on the old French liner the *Normandy*, which was one of the, I guess, the biggest ocean liner then in existence, which was in New York. But while we were on the train on the way up, the *Normandy* was sabotaged in New York Harbor, turned over on its side. After five weeks, I guess the Pentagon decided that they couldn't figure out what to do with us, didn't have, I suppose, the transportation, and just shipped us back to Florida from where we had come. Where we would have gone, I can only guess. It seems to me that there were two possibilities. We were then in the process of setting up aircraft warning posts around the periphery of Latin America. That may have been a possible destination. The other was that the first American troops were about to be sent to the UK, specifically to Northern Ireland, and we might have been setting up that kind of installation there. So I can only guess it could have been one or the other. If that had happened, I would have been one of the first troops outside the U.S. after our entry into the war.

LC: Yes. Yes, absolutely. That's very interesting. Did you continue then to be at Drew Field?

JM: Within a week after returning to Florida, a number of us were assigned to a radio training school in Athens, Georgia. This was very good training for three months.

It was conducted by a civilian contractor, was carried out in a very effective manner, not that I was ever very successful on dit-dahs, the radio operator code, but that training was good. But meanwhile, I had been trying ever since I had gotten into the Army to get into Officer Candidate School, but I couldn't find any officers willing to accept my application. There was always some excuse that it's, "We were not authorized to accept it at this stage." Then after three months in Georgia, I got back to Tampa, Florida. This time, instead of being in the swamp at Drew Field, we were in an old cattle barn on the fairgrounds right in the heart of the city of Tampa. There I found a sympathetic first lieutenant who took my application and processed it through channels for Officer Candidate School. We stayed there, continuing our training and radio operation and maintenance, again not too effectively. Not like the course in Georgia.

LC: Okay.

JM: Until I was selected to go to Officer Candidate School. Out of all this time I remained a private. I couldn't even get a promotion to corporal. Finally, out of my selection to Officer Candidate School, all those who were being admitted to that school were automatically promoted to sergeant. I had my sergeant stripes sewed on one day, got on the train to go from Tampa to Miami where the Officer Candidate School was located. The next day arrived there and the sergeant stripes were ripped off because everybody who entered Officer Candidate School was considered on equal basis and no stripes were permitted, even though I did get the pay of sergeant at that stage.

LC: (Laughs) You just couldn't flash your stripes around.

JM: Right. I might say on pay, when I first entered the Army, the pay was twenty-one dollars a month, raised subsequently to thirty dollars a month for a buck private.

LC: When you arrived in Miami, was the radio training that you had received taken into account?

JM: No. It really had—the whole thing was in effect a waste because it had no relevance to the Officer Candidate School training.

LC: Okay.

JM: I might describe briefly the Air Force Officer Candidate School.

LC: Yes, please do.

JM: It had been set up just a few months previously. I think ours was the fifth group to go through it. Every six weeks, a new class came in and the total course was three months. So we had six weeks as underclassmen and six weeks as upperclassmen. There were about twenty-five hundred in each entering group. We were divided into squadrons of, I don't know maybe a hundred each. I can't remember the exact number now, and billeted in hotels in Miami Beach. Our classrooms were often old nightclubs, in old nightclubs in Miami Beach. I went through that three-month's training course. The six weeks of undergraduates, we were treated just the way newly entering students at West Point and Annapolis are. We were subject to hazing and very rigid discipline, scarcely ever permitted outside the hotel except for official duties.

LC: What kind of hazing went on, Joe?

JM: Oh, for example being lined up at attention in the corridor and then trying to reach over and touch your toes, which is impossible without falling head-over-heels on your face, of course, as an example. Constant little harassments on the part of upperclassmen, the kind of thing that one gets—I don't know if they still do it, but used to get at military institutions and to a degree as freshmen in college.

LC: Sure.

JM: But much less so in that atmosphere.

LC: Now the Air Force, Army Air Force as you know it was just being separately organized at this point. Did you have a sense of what its mission was and how that differed from the infantry?

JM: Well, I suppose the honest answer to that question is, I didn't—being way down the line, I didn't have much sense of the difference. Obviously, the Air Force was devoted to a—the Army Air Force was devoted to a different supplementary form of warfare from the old ground forces. I think it's generally known without my trying to describe it what the difference is between somebody in the Air Force and somebody in the ground forces. I suppose that it's preferable to be in the Air Force instead of the ground forces from a number of standpoints.

LC: I wonder if they were, if in briefings or in the classroom work, they were talking to the officer candidates at all about how airpower was being used in Europe?

JM: Not particularly. I can't say that we were being instructed in any of the broader aspects of the use of airpower. Our courses were of a much more mundane and limited nature.

LC: Okay. What was an average day like there?

JM: We were in classes—well, I think we arose at 6:00AM, fell out immediately for roll call, then rushed back to make our beds and clean our bathrooms. You couldn't even have a drop of water in the sink or you were subject to demerits and would have to walk punishment tours. Then marched off in formation for breakfast and then went to classes for several hours, marched off again for lunch, more classes in the afternoon, and then marched off for dinner and back to our hotels, which we couldn't leave, to study in the evening. Lights had to be out at nine o'clock.

LC: Sounds fairly rigid.

JM: Then on Saturdays and Sundays, there were big parades and reviews of the usual military nature for the whole twenty-five hundred.

LC: When did you graduate? Do you remember?

JM: At the end of October 1942.

LC: You were commissioned at that point?

JM: Commissioned as second lieutenant and then placed on a train loaded with brand-newly minted second lieutenants being shipped to California from Florida. It took us five days for this trainload of second lieutenants to cross the continent from one end to the other, even going through your state of Texas. That was my first experience with Texas. I remember going through it at that point.

LC: Well, if you were—

JM: We were all being shipped to the Air Force West Coast Training Center, which had its headquarters at Santa Ana, California. This operated all of the training bases of the Air Force in most of the western states. Then we were parceled out, the whole train got parceled out, in assignments to the various bases in that training command.

LC: What assignment came to you, Joe?

JM: I was assigned to Yuma Army Airfield, to base intelligence, but since that was a brand-new installation, I was given thirty days temporary duty at Williams Field,

which is about thirty miles outside of Phoenix. Then completely in the countryside, now of course, Phoenix has filled up to cover of that entire area.

LC: What did you do at Williams? Do you remember?

JM: Well, I was basically learning the ropes of base intelligence. The kinds of things in which we were involved was to investigate any subversive allegations about any member, anybody assigned to the base, which did not turn out to be very consequential. We also were involved in investigation of all airplane accidents to see whether there was any indication of sabotage. Those were the two main aspects of base intelligence. The base intelligence later came to include the writing of the history of the base and the units on it and also the establishment and operation of a war information center designed to try to indoctrinate the troops on what was happening in the war and what our overall aims and purposes were.

LC: Did you come—?

JM: I might add one other base intelligence duty was to lecture all of the units and soldiers from time to time on safeguarding military information.

LC: Were these the kinds of duties that you carried out at Yuma?

JM: That's right. Exactly.

LC: How long were you there?

JM: Two-and-a-half years, almost two-and-a-half years at Yuma. I arrived there, the base had not—there were still just a few officers and a few enlisted men assigned. The base itself was under construction. Within about a month, however, we moved into our so-called permanent facilities, quarters, and offices.

LC: What activities were taking place at Yuma?

JM: The original purpose was to train pilots and subsequently it was converted into an aerial gunnery-training base.

LC: By aerial gunnery, can you describe what you mean by that?

JM: Well, on all bombers at least, there was in addition to the pilot, the pilot or pilots, the navigators, an aerial gunner who operates the armament on it, who he had to be trained in how to use it and how to use it effectively.

LC: Were there accidents that you did have to investigate?

JM: Oh, yes, quite a number. I remember one very vividly. I guess this was Christmas Day, 1943. I was in the officer's club when the number two on the base came up to me and said, "We have gotten word that an Air Force plane crossing from some base in the central or eastern part of the United States on its way to California had gone down in the mountains. I want you to take part in a field investigation. You have to proceed and find the wreckage, which has been identified from the air, but it's in a place difficult to access in the mountains about ninety miles away. Bring out the bodies and try to figure out what caused the accident." So I suppose there must have been about, with officers and enlisted men, ten or a dozen of us on this mission. We proceeded to, I guess it was Blythe, California, where we stayed overnight. Then the next day, this was near the scene of the accident, proceeded into the mountains. After a certain point we had to get out and walk into the mountains to find the crash site, try to figure out what happened, pick up the remains of the bodies, and carry them out. That's one of the more vivid experiences I remember.

LC: Yes.

JM: There were obviously a number of training accidents. We investigated those as well as those not related to our particular base. I might add one other function of the base intelligence office.

LC: Please.

JM: Was to encode and decode any messages which came in that form into the base. It turned out in 1943, when desert maneuvers were being carried out across the border in California by large units of the Army ground forces they didn't have the facilities for encoding or decoding. So when they would get an encoded message, they would come over and often we had to get up in the middle of the night and decode their messages for them.

LC: So you remember being awakened?

JM: Oh, yes.

LC: And having to—

JM: Yes. Being pulled out of the movie theater one night.

LC: Oh, really? Was there a theater on base that you were going to?

JM: There was a—there was—yeah. There was a movie theater on base.

LC: Joe, were any of the accident investigations that you conducted productive of intelligence about sabotage.

JM: No. None. None.

LC: Never?

JM: Looking back, I can't say that base intelligence provided a very particularly useful function, but that was probably also true of certain other functions on a training base.

LC: Very likely. Joe, were you—how aware were you there in Arizona of the internment of Japanese nationals and Japanese civilians?

JM: Quite aware, because in addition to our responsibilities in base intelligence to the west coast training command in Santa Ana, California, we also had to respond to a unit of the Western Defense Command. I think that was the only actual operational command established in the United States during the war because of Pearl Harbor and the concern about possible aerial attacks or submarine landings on the West Coast. The Pentagon established an operational command with headquarters in Presidio in San Francisco, which had a—that command had an intelligence unit in Phoenix, to which we were also responsible for reporting and visiting and discussing activities. It was through them that we learned about the internment of the Japanese. I think that program was authorized by President Roosevelt, directed by President Roosevelt, and actually I think carried out by the Western Defense Command. I must say, at that stage in America with the threat that the Japanese represented to us, I feel that it was a justified action at that time.

LC: Okay. Do you remember it starting to come a little bit unwound as the war progressed and victories in the Pacific made the likelihood of an attack on the U.S. mainland recede? Do you remember some releases happening from camps?

JM: No, I don't, because I wasn't that close to that program at that stage. I don't know of any specific instances.

LC: Now at what point did you leave Yuma?

JM: I left Yuma in May of 1945. I was assigned to an overseas replacement depot in Greensboro, North Carolina, with assignment to Europe. I didn't know where in Europe, but my orders simply said to a European project. However, on my way to that

base, VE Day, Victory in Europe Day, came in Europe. So my assignment to Europe turned out, of course, to be superfluous. Pretty soon however, I received an indication that I would be assigned to overseas to some base in the Pacific. Meanwhile, I had been interviewed some months earlier in Yuma, while I was still in Yuma, by a representative from the Office of Strategic Services, which was the intelligence agency established by President Roosevelt, I believe in 1941. The first time we'd had an intelligence agency of that sort, I think, in U.S. history.

LC: Yes.

JM: I was interviewed by them, and they offered it seemed to me an interesting prospect of useful work. Therefore, as I passed through Washington on my way to North Carolina, I visited—I had not heard anything more from OSS (Office of Strategic Services). I visited the OSS and found that they were still quite interested in having me assigned to them. So I said I would be quite interested and they proceeded to affect that transfer. So after about a month in North Carolina, I was actually transferred to the Office of Strategic Services in Washington.

LC: At what date?

JM: This was in June 1945.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me anything about that interview that you had in Yuma? What kinds of things did they want to know, and how did it get arranged?

JM: I think the officers from OSS were proceeding to all bases in, probably in the U.S., but certainly in the west coast area, and interviewing anybody who was interested in possible transfer to OSS. That's the way I recall it.

LC: What kinds of things did they tell you about the process?

JM: You know, Laura, I can't specifically recall now.

LC: Okay. That's fine.

JM: But in view of the fact that I didn't think my work in Yuma was particularly useful any longer except in the War Information Center. Because I was not certain how useful I would be in air intelligence overseas, where one had to be able to identify enemy aircrafts. Since I was not very proficient in that area, I thought I could be more useful to the war effort by transferring to OSS, the Office of Strategic Services.

LC: Joe, let's take a break for a moment.

JM: Okay.

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Mr. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the thirtieth of April 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the interview room of the Special Collections Building. Mr. Mendenhall is joining me by the telephone from Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: There was something that you wished to add about your time at Yuma, Arizona.

JM: Yes. I think I indicated that my experience with the War Information Center in Yuma, which I ran, was one of the more interesting and useful aspects of the period I spend there.

LC: Yes.

JM: I would like to add some information to what I related in our last conversation.

LC: Please do.

JM: During the time I was there, I became quite interested in two books published by, written and published by Walter Lippmann during World War II. Books which greatly whetted my interest in international affairs and substantially shaped my own views at that time in this area. The two books, the first one published was *U.S. Foreign Policy*, and the second was *U.S. War Aims*. I had occasion a little more than twenty years ago to review Lippmann's career as an influential columnist when I reviewed a biography of him written by Ronald Steel. I'd like to quote just a few words from that book about Lippmann's views during World War II.

LC: That would be very welcome.

JM: As Steel states, he quote, "Worked out a consistent diplomacy based on military power, alliances, spheres of influence, and a cold calculation of national interest. He became the apostle of a hard-headed *realpolitik*," close quote. That, as I indicated, greatly influenced my views on what the U.S. should be seeking to achieve both during

the war and in the negotiations, which ensued after the war. I will add, however, that in preparing this review of Steel's book for the magazine *Strategic Review*, I found that my—not to my surprise, that my assessment of Lippmann had considerably changed over the decades as his views changed. I would characterize him, I think, as the flawed Olympian. He had great influence on U.S. foreign affairs for many decades, but his views were also often inconsistent and in my view, quite flawed. I'll just cite a few instances.

LC: Sure.

JM: He opposed President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945. He also condemned Churchill's famous speech in February 1946 about the establishment of an iron curtain in Europe by Stalin. He even called on Truman to resign in 1946. In 1948 he said he does not know how to conduct foreign relations or to be commander-in-chief. He deplored Churchill's speech. He condemned George Kennan's "Mr. X" article in 1947, which enunciated a doctrine of containment of the Soviet Union as a quote, "strategic monstrosity," close quote, designed to fail. In one of the most amazing shifts in his views, in late 1948, he inveighed against the proposed NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) treaty and quote, "Those zealous cold warriors who thought every country not occupied by the Red Army should be drafted into a western coalition." He saw no need for a military alliance—actually close quote with, "western coalition." He saw no need for a military alliance with Western Europe. This was an astonishing view, which came from a man who had earlier proposed the Atlantic community include not only those countries that eventually joined the Atlantic pact but also Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland, plus Latin America, Liberia, and South Africa. So Lippmann had great influence on me at one stage. I cannot subscribe to many of the views he expressed subsequently. I might even draw a comparison in my estimation between Lippmann and George Kennan. George Kennan has gotten great historical praise with which I agree, of course, as the man who made a major contribution to the Containment policy, which we followed for decades with respect to the Soviet Union and Communist China, as a matter of fact. But in many of his subsequent policy positions in my view, Kennan came to the wrong conclusion. In the 1950s, he opposed Germany's, West Germany's entrance into the Atlantic alliance and supported the neutralization

policy, which was put forth by the Socialists in Germany, in West Germany at that point. That, I believe, if it had been adopted as our policy would have resulted in Germany's falling under the influence and domination of the Soviet Union and was a terribly wrong-headed approach. So Kennan, despite as Lippmann had done at one stage, putting forth views which represented the best interest of the United States subsequently, I think, proved that even gentlemen as prominent as they are not by any means always right, and can be put down—as I put it, both were flawed Olympians. That's what I wanted to add to what I said the last time.

LC: Very good. I wonder if you'll entertain a question or two?

JM: Sure.

LC: Was Lippmann do you think generally read among officers at that time? Officers at least who were posted in the States during World War II?

JM: You know, I can't really answer that with any degree of certitude, Laura. I would think that among those who were interested in these broad questions he would have been read, because he was probably the most influential of newspaper columnists in the country at that stage, even as late as 1967. Lyndon Johnson called him in to try to convince him in to support the Vietnam War.

LC: Yes.

JM: He still thought that Lippmann had a great deal of influence. So I would assume that a lot of those who were interested in these big questions did read Lippmann at that stage.

LC: Joe, did you ever have a chance to meet him?

JM: No, I did not. I never met Lippmann and I never met Kennan.

LC: You never met Kennan?

JM: No. I never did.

LC: Oh, okay. That was a question that I next wanted to ask, whether you had met him. What about some of the other important journalists who commented on international and strategic questions, for example the Alsops. Did you come across them?

JM: Well, I remember having lunch one time with Stewart Alsop in Washington. He invited me to lunch and asked a number of questions I think related to Vietnam,

which came up much later during my career, of course. I think that was the only time I was ever in contact with him, but I did see Joe Alsop several times. He and I came into a very decisive parting of the ways on President Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam. I won't go into my views on that now since it will arise later, but he remembered it very well and even when I saw him subsequently at a dinner party, he even brought the issue up quite directly with me. So he knew that he and I differed.

LC: Okay. Well, I should make a note that we must come to that when the time is right. Joe, going back to 1945 and your transfer to the OSS, you had brought us to the point last time we spoke of discussing your interview and your interest in taking up a position. Can you tell me about your move I presume to Washington?

JM: Yes. Well, the interview took place in Yuma. The original interview took place in Yuma I believe around January or February 1945. Then when I was transferred to an overseas replacement depot in North Carolina in May of '45 with assignment to a European project and that fell through because Victory in Europe Day, VE Day intervened. I went through Washington at that stage and I dropped in at OSS to see whether they were still interested in me because the interviewer had manifested considerable interest. I found that they were very much. Then my assignment to a Europe—to a base in Europe was cancelled because of VE Day. Then I was assigned to a Pacific project, but while I was waiting for my orders to go to the Pacific, I received orders from OSS transferring me to Washington and assignment to that agency. I would say the orders were issued by the War Department as transferring me to OSS.

LC: Okay. Joe, can you tell me where you were then on VE Day and what you remember about that?

JM: Well, on VE Day, I think I was at home with my parents, preparatory to going to the overseas replacement depot when VE Day came along.

LC: Okay. Where would that have been?

JM: In northeastern Maryland, where I was born.

LC: In Maryland? Okay.

JM: On the farm.

LC: Was there any kind of local hoopla or anything you remember about that day? How did your parents feel?

JM: Well, no. I think I stayed in the country that day. We were even ten miles from the closest town. I can't say the countryside engages in that kind of hoopla.

LC: This is true. So going through Washington, you did stop at the OSS headquarters, and I can't recall whether I did ask you. Do you remember who you interviewed with?

JM: No. I think perhaps—now I know it was not the gentleman who interviewed me in Yuma. It was someone, obviously in personnel I assume, connects you with recruitment for OSS.

LC: Okay. The Pacific project that you soon were assigned to, did you have much information about the parameters?

JM: None at all. Simply that I would be assigned somewhere in the Pacific. I had no specific information at all.

LC: Okay. When did you begin to get a clear sense of what it was you would be doing?

JM: In OSS?

LC: Mm-hmm.

JM: Well, the first thing that happened after I arrived in Washington was attendance to a two-week orientation course at Georgetown University on the Far East, which was very useful to me because it was not an area with which I was well acquainted, because I had not studied any aspect of it during the time that I was in college. So I found that a very good introduction to the area. I might recount one little story, Laura, a human-interest story.

LC: Please do.

JM: One of our lecturers during those two weeks was Ruth Benedict, probably I suppose the most famous anthropologist, female anthropologist anyway, in the U.S. after Margaret Mead at that time. This talk by her was scheduled in the evening, I think about 6:00 or 6:30. She obviously had had one or two too many cocktails before she arrived.

LC: I see.

JM: At the lecture. So what she said was interesting. It often came out in a sort of lisping fashion with the enjoyment she had gone through earlier. I've always remembered that aspect of it.

LC: As you say, she's a very, very well known scholar and very influential in shaping academia on the Far East. Do you remember anything else about the content of that course?

JM: Well, as I say, since it was new to me, the lectures by and large to my recollection were good. I really learned something during those two weeks. I learned considerable amounts, as a matter of fact, during the two weeks I was there. Then a certain time passed. In all bureaucracy, a certain time passed before the decision was made as to what I was going to do in OSS. Then I learned that I was to be assigned to the first Korean language and Korean area training course sponsored by OSS, which was to begin in late July at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. While I was waiting to go to Philadelphia—I might interject—during this waiting period, the thought came into my mind, why not inquire since I'm here in Washington, at the State Department about Foreign Service officer examinations? There had not been any for more than four years, since 1941. I went down to the State Department, picked up the literature they were passing out, and learned that the State Department was accepting applications for the first examination in more than four years and that the deadline was, I think as I recall, about a week away. So I said, well, nothing is lost. I may as well apply to take the examination, which I did in July 1945 while I was waiting in Washington to go onto Philadelphia to initiate my Korean language and area training.

LC: Now this was the written exam, I take it?

JM: Yeah the written—well, the examination process was always initially a written, then an oral, and finally a physical examination. Those were the three steps in order to make it into Foreign Service officer status.

LC: Was it a rigorous exam?

JM: Well, I'll get to that.

LC: Okay.

JM: Why don't we get to that later?

LC: Sure.

JM: Why don't we proceed with the OSS part of it then I'll—if that'd be okay.

LC: That would be fine.

JM: Because the exam didn't take place until several months had elapsed.

LC: Okay. Until November, as my records indicate.

JM: Right. Exactly. Right.

LC: So you've been assigned now to Korean language and area training. First of all, can I ask you what your response was on finding out that that would be your assignment?

JM: Well, I found that interesting and potentially a challenging area because no one at that time knew how long the war in East Asia would last. It was generally assumed as a matter of fact that the war against Japan would probably go on for at least another couple of years, and that the U.S., because of the extremist views of the Japanese who generally refused to surrender until they were all killed, that the U.S. casualties might even reach the—might well reach the level of a million over that two-year period. Remember, nobody knew anything about the atomic bomb at that point, other than the tightly-held group within the U.S. at the top of the U.S. government. So it was generally assumed that the war there would continue for quite some time.

LC: When did you go up to Philadelphia?

JM: In late July and started the course. I think there were seven of us in that course. We had a number of lectures. Some of them covered more than Korea with respect to area training, but most of them were devoted to Korea. We had Korean language training for six months by a native Korean speaker with another fellow, I've forgotten what he was called, who sort of guided the process with the non-academically trained native speaker.

LC: Do you remember anything about the other people who were in the class?

JM: Yes. I do remember them. I think only—I believe only about three or four out of the seven completed the course. It was a six-month course. As everybody knows very well, within a couple of weeks after we started that course, the atomic bombs, two atomic bombs, were dropped on Japan. Japan elected to surrender at that stage. The emperor did and carried his country with him. But the OSS continued that course until its scheduled completion.

LC: Joe, can you describe your thinking about the dropping the atomic devices on Japan at the time it happened and maybe subsequently?

JM: Well, I'll do it in two stages. Certainly from an overall U.S. interest standpoint, I thoroughly agree that that was the thing that should have been done. Like almost all Americans at that stage, we welcomed any action that would bring an end to the war and avoid the possibility of a million additional American casualties in World War II.

LC: Yes. Did you have any thoughts as the years went on about the wisdom of that choice?

JM: Never have. I think it was an absolutely correct decision on Truman's part, and I might add that at the time of the Smithsonian Institute's controversy over the airplane the *Enola Gay*, which dropped the first bomb on Japan, in the mid 1990s. I thought that the approach being taken as the Smithsonian, which wanted to downgrade the significance of this by playing up the opposition, I felt was absolutely outrageous and resigned as a member of the Smithsonian as a result of it.

LC: Did you really? I know that there was at least one book written about that controversy, and it certainly was an interesting piece of the culture wars of the 1990s.

JM: Exactly.

LC: You said that a number of people who were in the Korean language and training class did not complete that course. Were they—

JM: I think some because VJ Day had come, and some because as the course went on they felt they weren't really adept at trying to master an Oriental language.

LC: And how did you do, Joe?

JM: Well, I guess I did well on paper, but since I ever used it subsequently, I can remember only about three or four sentences of it now, and therefore in a sense, it did not prove ultimately to be useful training.

LC: Yes, it's interesting that you did not have an assignment later on, given how much the United States invested.

JM: Yes, I don't know why the State Department never took that into consideration. I didn't push for it, and I suppose at the time of my first assignment in 1946, I'm not even sure we had a diplomatic mission in Korea.

LC: I think that's probably accurate. But you certainly did end up with some interesting assignments nonetheless. Where did you live when you were at UPenn?

JM: In one of the dormitories, in a room at the dormitory, and I think we took our meals—yes, we took our meals also in a dining hall at the university.

LC: Okay. So you were integrates with other students in those ways?

JM: Well, not really. We had virtually no contact with the other students. What we were doing was using the facilities of the University of Pennsylvania, and one—as I recall, the OSS official who was in charge of this training—not only Korean language but probably all the Far East language training and area courses as well, had been a professor on leave from the University of Pennsylvania, and that was probably the reason it was chosen as the site for the training. He was a gentleman whose—Dr. Brown, as I recall his name—whose specialty was India. Charming old gentleman and extremely knowledgeable, particularly about India.

LC: You said that there was some regional content to the courses as—

JM: Well, not a great deal there. But to some extent, I think we got some talks about other countries in East Asia, but it was almost, almost completely devoted to Korea.

LC: During this time, I gather Joe, you took that written exam for the Foreign Service?

JM: That's right, in November of 1945, in the midst of this training. The first scheduled Foreign Service Officer examination by the State Department in over four years was given solely as, I recall, to veterans and to people who were still serving in the armed forces. I took the examination at Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. Two-day written examination. Shall I give you a brief description of that examination?

LC: I wish very much that you would.

JM: The first section was a testing of comprehension of reading ability. Second was an examination of the ability to understand mathematical reasoning concepts. Third was, I believe, a multiple-choice, long multiple-choice effort to test our knowledge of facts in numerous areas including history, literature, economics, various aspects of academic life. The fourth was a testing of our ability to write in a fashion that could be understood. Finally was a foreign language examination, of which I took the French. I might add that before the examination, I had already been out of college for four or five years, and the only thing I got out my college notes in several history, economics, and I

believe literature courses, and went over those notes on weekends, and that was the only preparation in which I engaged. I came through that examination with what I recall was a relatively good grade. Anyway, I passed it quite well and was placed on the waiting list to be called for the oral examination, which did not occur until eight months later.

LC: Right, in the spring I think. Or actually—

JM: It was in June when I—by which time I had already been demobilized. I just perceived that I took the oral examination in June. It lasted, I would say, for something like three-quarters of an hour, and conducted by a board of five people, three of whom were serving ambassadors. The fourth was a representative of the Department of Commerce, and the fifth a representative of the Department of Agriculture, since at that point, the State Department had absorbed the foreign services of both those two departments.

LC: While we're talking about it, do you remember much about the content of that exam.

JM: Well, what I would say is that since it was—it could be extremely wide-ranging, as one could see from the experiences of the board members. One was not expected to necessarily be able to give a correct, factual answer to all the questions that were posed, but it also tested how one handled himself if he didn't know the answer, and obviously the boards did not appreciate bluffing if you didn't know. You were expected to admit it. I remember one of the questions from the Department of Agriculture man. I think it's the only specific one I remembered. "What are the principle apple-producing states in the U.S.?" I don't think I gave a—I think I didn't know that, and I indicated well, I didn't really know the answer. I said, "I can provide some guesses, but I don't really know the answer." Which I think put me down in the favorable book of that particular questioner.

LC: That may indeed have been the purpose of the question.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Joe, when did the coursework at U Penn reach its end?

JM: It ended in late January 1946. I then proceeded to the OSS headquarters in Washington, and OSS was then assigning quite a number of people to China. I don't think they were assigning anybody to Korea at that stage, but they were assigning a

number of people to China, and I said that I would be prepared to go to China in uniform, provided OSS could get me promoted from first lieutenant to captain, because I had been a first lieutenant for two-and-a-half years. I wanted the grade of captain if I was going to stay in uniform. Well, OSS checked this out with the War Department and the answer came back, "We are not promoting anybody who is staying in uniform at this stage. We don't know when promotions will again be unfrozen, so we cannot agree to this." So then OSS offered me a job as a civilian in China. I said "Fine." They offered a salary, I think, of $3600 a year, and I think I was making $2000 as a first lieutenant, so that looked pretty good to me.

LC: Yes, indeed.

JM: I agreed to go as a civilian. All the paperwork was done and on the basis of that, my fiancée and I decided to get married because the only possibility of her joining me at some time in the future—wives were not going out to East Asian countries at that stage—would be if she were my wife. She could not come out as my fiancée. So, we proceeded to get married on March 17, 1946. I was—I had been demobilized, I was still in uniform on terminal leave. Married in her family's home on East 83rd Street in Manhattan in New York City and went off on our honeymoon to Williamsburg, came back to Washington after a week to learn that my job had fallen through completely. Here I was with a new wife and no job. So then I pounded the streets for about three weeks, trying to find a job, saying to myself that if I don't find a job I could always go back to law school at ninety dollars a month, which was the subsidy being passed out by the Department of—by the U.S. government to veterans at that time, even though it would not have been a great deal to support a wife and myself.

LC: No.

JM: I also applied to certain universities for graduate work in international affairs. I pounded the streets of Washington, trying to find a job, particularly in the intelligence area. One that I remember quite specifically was the Department of—well, it was the then, we still had the War Department intelligence, and I was informed, "We do not hire any civilians unless you have your Ph.D.," which I obviously did not, so that put an end to that. But after about three weeks, I got word from the Strategic Services Unit, which was the interim successor to OSS, which had been abolished by President Truman

in September of ’45, and the establishment of CIA in 19—late ’46 or ’47. I got word through the Strategic Services Unit that they were prepared to employ me as an editor and analyst in Washington of reports coming in from China. I accepted with alacrity.

LC: Yes, I’m sure. And moved then down to Washington?

JM: Well, I was in Washington, because after our honeymoon we had stayed on in Washington. I might add that living conditions in Washington then were extremely difficult. The first week in Washington after our return from our honeymoon in Williamsburg, we had a room at ninety dollars a month, three dollars a day, in the house of a retired minister and his wife. Lovely room, very pleasant house, but after one week there we decided we could no longer continue to afford ninety dollars a month, and we found a room advertised for thirty-four dollars a month closer in town. Incidentally at that time, it was utterly impossible to find apartments in Washington. Occasionally there were ads in the paper. My wife would look every morning, rush to that apartment, by the time she got there the apartment was gone. So one had to, even as a couple we had to live in a single room and take all our meals out. So we moved to this room at thirty-four dollars a month only to find that the landlord had a dog who chose our bedroom door to do all his deposits in the morning.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: That didn’t last long. We stayed there, I think, for a couple of weeks and then moved to another room farther out at about forty dollars a month, still taking all our meals out including breakfast. We lived there for the four months we were in Washington.

LC: Where was that? Where is that located?

JM: Well, the last one was on Shepard Street in northwest Washington just off 14th Street. I remember I used to walk down through a branch of Rock Creek Park on a path which led over to 16th Street because of the nature of the ground in that area there had been no construction in this particular vicinity, so I walked down through the park and over to 16th Street to catch my bus down to work at the Strategic Services Unit, which was, well, near where the Watergate Apartment complex is now. Probably right on that spot.

LC: Okay. Can you describe the facility? Was it what we might think of as a government building from the ‘30s, or—

JM: No, well, it was a temporary building from World War I. There were still lots of them in Washington during and after World War II.

LC: Okay.

JM: This was a tempo construction of wood not in particularly good shape, and they were all subsequently torn down. There were a lot of them even on the Mall at that time, and they also were subsequently demolished. But that’s what I worked in for the four months I was there. I always took breakfast in the cafeteria of the agency.

LC: Was it a good cafeteria?

JM: Well, as cafeterias go, Laura, yes.

LC: I remember the one in the State Department. It wasn’t too bad.

JM: No, it’s not too bad. But it isn’t gourmet food, but at our level of income, one couldn’t ask for it.

LC: Right.

JM: At least it was inexpensive and nourishing.

LC: That’s right. Tell me, Joe, about the work that you did there.

JM: Well, the unit I was in was headed by a charming old gentleman by the name of Williams who was either born of missionary parents or had been a—I believe born of missionary parents but had lived a substantial amount of time in China and was well acquainted with the area. Under him we were, I believe, about four editors and analysts of the reports which came in from all the Strategic Services Unit field officers in China. We edited those reports and decided to which agencies, State Department, Defense, War Department, Navy Department and so on, these reports should be sent and added any comments which we thought were appropriate before the reports were distributed. This was interesting work. I enjoyed it during that period, although looking back now, not having had any experience in China, I wouldn’t say that I was the most accomplished analyst on those reports, but I think I was in the same boat with all of the others who were performing the same function.

LC: On the staff of four, do you remember any of the other people with whom you worked?

JM: Do I remember any of the others?

LC: Yes.

JM: One was a fellow of Chinese origin. I think had probably been born in the States, a fellow I liked very much. The two others were ladies, one quite young, the other one I would say probably in her thirties, somewhat older. I was then twenty-six, so somewhat older than I. All of whom were very easy to get along with. I enjoyed them.

LC: Very good. Do you remember any of their names?

JM: I can't say that I do. I think I could guess, Laura, but I don't think it would be worth it.

LC: Okay. Tell me about the, if you remember, the organization of the SSU (Strategic Services Unit) inside China? How big was the staff that was out in the field?

JM: Well, I think most of them were—I believe, now I'm not absolutely sure, I believe most of them were probably military personnel. There may have been some civilians there as well. I can't really give you a good description of that setup because we were never briefed and probably should not have been briefed on just what the organization was there on the part of the intelligence agency.

LC: Do you remember—?

JM: We didn't have a real need to know that.

LC: Sure. Sure. Joe, I'm asking whether you remember much about the degree of detail or degree of attention that was being devoted to the communists in China?

JM: A good deal at that stage, because this was the summer of 1946. The division between the Chinese Nationalists and the Chinese Communists had reoccurred, recurred and we were very concerned about that. It was in '46 as I recall that President Truman sent General Marshall out to China for a number of months in order to try to see whether an agreement could be worked out between these two opposing forces, which proved impossible. So there was a great deal of interest in China at that stage.

LC: Yes. Yes, I'm sure. Were you also—did you see reports coming in from, I don't know, reporting assets, let's say, in the Soviet Union about China or was it all sort of internal to China?

JM: No. I don't recall any coming in from the Soviet Union about China.

LC: Okay.

JM: Incidentally, I'll make this comment on that. Getting sources in the Soviet Union was always a real thorn as far as CIA was concerned as in any rigidly communist-controlled system. Trying to find sources other than defectors is extremely, extremely difficult.

LC: Yes, absolutely. Is there anything else that you can tell us about your time there with the SSU?

JM: No. I don't remember any specific highlights that came out of that. I was as I indicated, my oral examination occurred midway through that period of four months in June of '46. Then in July, I got my orders to report for duty to the State Department as Foreign Service officer in mid-August of '46.

LC: Did you have any qualms about leaving the Strategic Services Unit for the Foreign Service?

JM: Laura, I can't quite hear you.

LC: Oh. I was asking if you had any qualms or anxiety about leaving the Strategic Services Unit for the Foreign Service at the State Department?

JM: I did have a financial one. I don't know whether I mentioned that on the biographic sketch I sent you.

LC: No. No you didn't.

JM: Well, when I was interviewed initially for the position in the Strategic Services Unit, the salary discussed by the substantive people was $4,900 a year, which looked like a fabulous sum to me. But then they told me that the personnel people in Strategic Services Unit indicated that I would be paid only $3,600 a year. However, when my paychecks started arriving, they were based on $4,900 a year. I never knew how that got worked out, but since I was getting paid $4,900 a year, I didn't think I should question it, obviously.

LC: Right.

JM: Then when I got my orders to report to the State Department, the orders said that I would report—be hired at $3,600 a year, which meant I would be taking a $1,300 a year drop. However, during my oral examination, the ambassador, who was chairman of the board, at the end of the examination said to me—I think he called me in two or three hours after the examination took place that—said, "You have so impressed the board,

we're going to recommend that you be hired by the State Department at two in-grade steps above what you would normally come in. Instead of $3,600 you'd come in at about $3,900," which pleased me. Then when I got the written orders to duty at the State Department, I read it was $3,600. So I went down to the State Department to point this out, talked with a gentleman in personnel who's name was Tewell, and you'll see I regard him as an old tool because his acerbic comment was, "There's nothing in the file about this. You'll come in at $3,600 a year." I said, "Well, look. I'm now earning $4,900 a year, and that's a very substantial reduction." He said, "We're offering you a career, and you don't necessarily have one in that other agency." So, my wife and I thought on this for, I guess, twenty-four hours, and elected to take a $1,300 drop, which was what, about I suppose a quarter or a third of what we were earning, dropped to $3,600 a year and didn't get up to $4,900 a year for another three years in the Foreign Service. We can look back and laugh now, but it was a pretty big decision to make at the time.

LC: Well, yes. That's a substantial percentage cut, and a severe loss. Did you, though, take to heart his words about the career?

JM: Did I do what?

LC: Did you take to heart his advice to you about—?

JM: Yes, I did, as a matter of fact. Laura, I would certainly say on the basis of experience that it was ultimately the correct decision because the aim is if one's working in international affairs with assignments abroad is to become an ambassador. There was a much better opportunity in the career of Foreign Service to achieve that status than to try to do so through the CIA, through the intelligence agency. Some intelligence officers did eventually become ambassadors, but many more Foreign Service officers did. So ultimately it proved to—and ultimately, the policy decisions were made by the State Department under the president's overall control, of course, not by the intelligence agency. From both those standpoints, the decision, I think, was eventually a wise one.

LC: It's worth noting that you, sir, did become an ambassador. I hope that we will discuss that in due course.

JM: Yes.

LC: You had some initial training?

JM: Yeah, at that point, the State Department was starting orientation training, one month's orientation training, a course every two weeks because it had taken in quite a number of people from the armed forces, both veterans and those still in the armed forces who were about to leave and become civilians, starting these courses every two weeks. I don't recall. We may have been something like the sixth or eighth group, which initiated this two weeks' training course. I think we overlapped the first two weeks' training with the previous group in training and then overlapped with the subsequent group for the final two weeks of the four weeks' training. It was general orientation about—both with respect to the areas covered by the State Department and with respect to personnel and other matters. I do recall that the man who was in charge of the training, his name was Taylor, we recognized—I think virtually all of us recognized that he was the worst sort of Foreign Service officer who was the epitome of the image, which was often too well understood by most of the public. The officers coming in recognized that and chose to ignore it.

LC: What were your clues about that?

JM: Well, he was very biased on racial matters for one thing, I think, which appalled us.

LC: I see.

JM: Which for a Foreign Service officer is, I think, quite understandable, which we have to deal with foreign people. Racism pertains not only to color but also to nationality.

LC: Absolutely. Was he a New Englander? Do you remember?

JM: I don't recall where he was from. He didn't go to—he never rose too high. I think he was a mid-grade officer at that stage and I don't think he ever got much beyond that. Thank God.

LC: Right.

JM: I will say that during the lectures we had—most of the training was in the form of lectures—two people in particular impressed me. One was the fellow by the name McClintock, who was then the director of the Office of African Affairs. Now to understand the bureaucratic hierarchy in the State Department, there were then and probably still are—so there were then four geographic bureaus. Africa was not a

geographic bureau. It was an office under a bureau, because most of the African countries were not independent. He was the director of this office. He gave us a very lively, fascinating lecture which absorbed, I think, everyone in the training class. He went on to become an ambassador to quite a number of different countries, very successful career-wise. I remember much, much later—well, I guess this would have been in 1969, he was between ambassadorial assignments, and was a special assistant then to the—I think he was called the—anyway, the number two officer in the State Department, who in the new Nixon administration was Elliot Richardson of Massachusetts. At that stage, several—this was a Republican administration. Several of the Democratic senators on the Foreign Relations Committee were trying to discredit this new administration from the outset through political attacks, particularly on treaties that had been concluded. Richardson, instead of going up himself when invited to testify, sent his special assistant McClintock up and somehow, the lie didn't have that much to do with Richardson. I heard him say, "Oh, let's just see how McClintock handles this one." There was a hot potato obviously in dealing with the committee on this question. The other—I will add one more thing about McClintock. McClintock was evidently a man extremely fond of his champagne. He was heard to boast that he drank a magnum of champagne each day. When he retired, he retired to France. The poor man was ultimately killed crossing a street in the French town, I suppose, where he lived. That's so a tragic ending.

LC: Yes, very.

JM: Maybe he was looking for a magnum of champagne, I don't know.

LC: That's very likely. It seems as if it's likely.

JM: He was very impressive. He justified that impression by his subsequent career, an ambassador to at least four or five countries. The other lecturer who impressed us was a fellow from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, who lectured us on Turkey and, I believe, the Near East in general. I'm not sure I can remember his name now, but he also—he was not a Foreign Service officer. He was a civil service employee of the State Department, but he came through very, very well also. Some of the lecturers did not, obviously did not impress, but I can't remember their names now.

LC: Joe, may I just ask you whether security played a role in the orientation, security of classified information?

JM: Not particularly at that stage, as I recall. It was later that security began to acquire so much emphasis, because at that stage the existence of communist agents within agencies of the U.S. government had not really come out publicly.

LC: Right. This is the summer of 1946.

JM: This was ’46 and I think it was not until about ’49 that the existence of these agents and some in high-level positions like White, the number two man in the Treasury Department under Roosevelt, began to emerge.

LC: When did you learn about your first assignment?

JM: Well, we were—during this four-weeks course, we were asked at one stage to list our three posts of preference in descending order. All of us said, “Well, we’ll do it,” but we pooh-poohed it because we said, “They’ll never pay any attention to us. We’re all new people. They’ll assign us to the most remote posts in the world.” My wife and I used to kid each other and say, “Well, the most remote we have is a town by the name of T-I-H-U-A in the westernmost province in China. That’s probably where they’ll send us.” Fortunately, our prediction turned out to be wrong because the two people who were sent there when the communists took over in 1949 walked thousands of miles out of there because of the communist takeover. One died on the way out. They were two men.

LC: Yes, a very famous story. Yes.

JM: Right. We listed our three posts of preference in this order. First was Peking as we then called it, because I had been working on China in the Strategic Services Unit and thought this would be a good opportunity to get to China and learn more about that area toward which I had begun to acquire some knowledge. Second was Vienna in Austria, which I think we put down mainly because of the romantic atmosphere associated with Vienna, which certainly we would have found disillusioning, I think, if we had arrived there.

LC: In 1946? Yes, probably.

JM: In 1946, although it would have been interesting from a substance standpoint

LC: Oh, sure.

JM: The third one we put down was Istanbul, again because of its long historic and romantic aura. Plus the fact that during World War II they had been very much an espionage center and had aroused a lot of intrigue and interest as a result of that. Istanbul turned out to be our assignment.

LC: Joe, you both must have been very pleased.

JM: We were. We were very happy with the Istanbul assignment. So once we got the assignment, we began to make our preparations—we got the assignment, I think, about in mid-September, just as the course ended. We began to make our preparations for departure. We had very little money, so we couldn't buy a great deal, but we did buy some things. We were booked to sail on October 4, 1946, on the *Volcania*. Now the *Volcania* had been an Italian ocean liner, luxury ocean liner before World War II, but had been converted into a troop ship. My wife's parents—her stepfather in particular who as a child, as a young person had been taken to Europe every summer before World War I by his parents, and had obviously was well-acquainted with luxury ocean travel—gave us all these stories about how we would be dressing for dinner each night. We would have a lovely stateroom and so forth. Well, my wife's parents came down to see us off at the pier in New York City and came aboard with us for a half-hour, an hour. Instead of luxury, everything—the ship had not—we were all civilians on the ship. It had not been reconverted from troopship status to civilian. All accommodations were similar. When they started showing us the cabin, we kept going down, down, down, down into the bowels of the ship. It turned out, we did have a room with a porthole, but the door couldn't even be locked. There were two chairs in the lounge for all the hundreds of people aboard that ship, two chairs in the lounge, a lounge. The meals were all taken at long, mess-like tables. So even though my wife's parents appeared with a bottle of champagne to see us off, we were somewhat disillusioned about ocean travel at the outset, as you can see.

LC: How long was your passage?

JM: Well, it took us nine days to get to Naples. We were in port in Naples for two days. The harbor in Naples was full of sunken hulks of ships from the wartime damage. Naples itself had suffered very considerable damage. Being that—the first thing we noticed was right after the ship docked, we were surrounded by lots of little

rowboats with people aboard. We began to see things being passed out of portholes down near the water level. These were black market cigarettes, which were being passed out by the Italian crewmembers of the ship to the local inhabitants, because at that stage, a carton of cigarettes at that stage in the U.S. cost a dollar. In Naples, it was ten dollars. So you can see what the black market was worth to these people.

LC: Yes.

JM: After all this had happened, about a couple of hours later, the Italian customs boats appeared in the vicinity. But by that time, all the damage had been done, obviously.

LC: They arrived right on time, which was a couple hours late.

JM: Right.

LC: So you stayed in Naples then for a couple of days?

JM: Yeah. We stayed in Naples for a couple of days. The ship offered two tours for seven dollars per person. The first one, one was to Pompeii, and the second one was to Capri, or what we say—the Italians call it Capri and we say Capri in the States. We had left the States with $200 in our pocket because we didn't have much money. So we decided we could only afford one of the two tours. We took the one to Pompeii, which we have always remembered with the greatest of pleasure. We also visited the apartment of one of the young lady vice consuls in the consulate general. This was by that time was mid-October. She was already complaining about how cold the apartment—the apartment looked quite luxurious with its marble floors, but it had no heat at that stage. I'm not sure whether it had much all winter. She was already complaining as to how bitterly cold it was. By visiting her for a drink, I think, we were able to confirm that personally. Subsequently, quite a number of us went on for dinner to a restaurant, Italian restaurant right in the port. I guess we had quite a good dinner. I wasn't well acquainted with Italian food there, so I can't really comment, but I will just add that basically that was 1946. In 1985, when my wife and I were living in Italy and we took a trip down to Naples, we went back to this restaurant which was still there. We told the owner-manager that we had been there in 1946 dining with this group of people. He made a great to-do out of it, welcomed us back with open arms after thirty-nine years.

LC: How wonderful. What a great story. Joe, let's take a break for today.

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing my oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the fourteenth of May 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building in its interview room. The ambassador joins me by telephone from Nevada. Good afternoon, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good afternoon, Laura.

LC: Joe, we were talking about your stopover in Naples en route to your, really, your first major posting.

JM: Yeah. After a couple of days in Naples, we re-boarded our ocean liner for another two-day voyage to the ship's final destination, which was Alexandria, Egypt. The first night out of Naples, I can remember now this was October 1946. The first night out of Naples I can remember passing the volcanic island of Stromboli, which was spewing fire yet even at that time. Rather interesting to see.

LC: Very much.

JM: Then we passed through the Straits of Messina about midnight, between the mainland of Italy and Sicily. It looked pretty romantic in the moonlight, but I'll tell you a little story that occurred many years later when my wife and I were living in retirement in Italy in Tuscany. We decided to drive down to Sicily for a—to see it. We had never been there before. At the end of one rather long day of driving late afternoon, we arrived at the village of what we in America call Scilla, you remember where they said between Scylla and Charybdis?

LC: Yes.

JM: Well, this was the village of Scilla, which the Italians spell somewhat differently. They spell it—well, maybe we spell it this way, S-C-I-L-L-A. They pronounce it Scilla. Anyway, I had seen in our guidebook that there was a hotel there. I stopped the car and since I had been driving all day and I was tired, I suggested my wife get out and check out the hotel, see what it looked like.

LC: Sure.

JM: So she got out and she came back a little later looking rather wan and shaken, saying, “Well, I finally found that hotel. It was on the third or fourth floor of some building, miserable-looking.” She said, “Everybody on the streets looked like a member of the mafia or a gangster from a 1930s film with dark glasses, hat pulled low over the eyes. Only males on the street and looking at me with—they were sort of glaring at me, ‘What are you doing in this town?’” She said, “I don’t want to stay here.” I said, “Okay. Well, get into the car.” I had noticed in the guidebook that about fifteen kilometers farther on, there was a palace that had belonged to the royal Bourbon family, the last ruling family of Naples and Sicily before Italy was reunified in 1860. I said, “We’ll go on and check it out and see whether we can afford it or not.” So we went on there. We arrived. We stopped. I went into the desk and asked if they had a room available. “Oh, yes.” I asked how much, and it was actually quite reasonable. So I said, “Fine. We will take it.” I got my wife. We went up to the room, and found that the balcony of the room overlooked the Straits of Messina towards Sicily, but it didn’t prove to be quite romantic by day as it was by night because there seemed to be an infinite number of high-tension wires passing the mainland and Sicily. That’s what we were looking down upon as we stood on our balcony. Then we went back into the room and pretty soon, I think they had told us at the desk that we were the only people in this palace hotel. It was the end of February. So the tourists were not traveling as yet, but pretty soon in our room the cook appeared from the kitchen to our immense surprise and said, “What would you like me to cook for dinner tonight?” We said, “Oh, how about grilled fish?” “Oh, that’s fine.” So, we fixed a time for dinner. We went down to the dining room. We were the only people in the dining room. We found that they had lit—since it was cold in the hotel including the dining room, the staff had pulled a little stove up next to our table, either propane fueled or kerosene, I can’t remember which. We sat there being warmed up and had a delicious grilled fish dinner. The only people in this huge hotel all that evening, being treated almost like royalty. So we’ve always looked back on that as a wonderful experience.

LC: So it would seem. It sounds as if it was wonderful.

JM: Then we proceeded on to Alexandria, where as we descended the gangplank we noticed the bags being unloaded from the ship, and the Egyptian Arab staff there, who

we never had any contact with before at all. The man in charge seemed to be at the top of his boiling point in anger, screaming at everybody else. We learned later that's just how the Arabs give orders, how they treat each other normally. That was our first experience with what is really a pretty emotional and volatile people. Again, I'll mention one little experience, which occurred much later, which proved the same point.

LC: Yes.

JM: In 1983, when we were living in Italy, my wife and I took an Italian tour group, went with an Italian tour group to Egypt. We went up to the pyramids outside Cairo. I decided to go inside the biggest of the pyramids there. My wife decided she didn't want to do it. I found at one point, the passageway was so low we were crawling on our hands and knees. It turned out to be an Egyptian holiday. So there were many Egyptians doing the same thing. The place was so full of people and the air began to become so fetid there were a lot of women, and they seemed to be getting excited. I said, "My God, if these Arabs ever decide to panic in here, in these narrow quarters, there's no hope of escaping." So before I got to the very inner part of the pyramid, I just turned around, crawled back out, and left. I never did get inside it. So that was my second experience with this extremely emotional nature, which seems to characterize the Arabs to a considerable degree.

LC: Joe, any idea what was sparking them to this great furor?

JM: Well, I think it was just the fact that it was so crowded and the air was getting so bad. These people were beginning to get a little disturbed themselves because of that.

LC: I see. Well, I think—

JM: They probably continued, but I lost my courage.

LC: I think you made probably a conservative but wise decision in that instant.

JM: We had—this was the days before we in the State Department Foreign Service were required to travel very much by air. We had a ten-day wait in Egypt for the first available ship to Istanbul from there. During those ten days we were first put up by the consulate general, our consulate general in Istanbul—in Alexandria. In a hotel on the outskirts of Alexandria right on the Mediterranean, Swiss-run, very clean, very, very attractive. We had rooms facing right over the Mediterranean. The rooms were very

nice, but I will add that there were no private bathrooms. For each floor, there was just one bathroom at the end of the hall. The dining room, which was down on the entrance floor, also faced the sea. Since this was late October and getting somewhat cool, there was a big canvas curtain, which could be pulled across between the dining room and the sea at night. If it was fair enough that was left open. Otherwise, it was pulled. We had delicious food and we stayed there about five days in this very attractive place. Incidentally, a number of years later we happened to meet the daughter of the Swiss hotel owner who was married to a CIA person who was working in Switzerland when we were there.

LC: No kidding.

JM: So we reminisced with them about that hotel about seven or eight years earlier than this subsequent meeting.

LC: You met that couple, or the daughter of the owners.

JM: I met the daughter, who was married to a CIA fellow who was stationed in Bern just as we were.

LC: Stationed in Bern at the same time?

JM: That's right.

LC: How remarkable. That's amazing.

JM: I'll tell you another—Nonie, my wife, and I decided after five days at this hotel that while we were in Egypt for so long, we really ought to go to Cairo and see the pyramids. This was 1946. The subsequent visit was 1983. Actually, we had been urged to do so by the American Labor attaché's wife in Cairo. She was on the ship with us crossing the ocean. Her husband was in Cairo and she urged us to come on down to Cairo. They were I think staying in a *ponceau* on the island of Zamalek in the middle of the Nile in Cairo. They said, "We'll make a room reservation for us if you decide to come." So my wife and I decided to do it. I went down to Wagons-Lits Cook, the British tourist agency in Alexandria, to make the train reservation. I got up to the wicket and I was asked, "Do you want deluxe or first class?" Well, I had left New York with two hundred dollars in my pocket for the month's crossing to Istanbul. So I said, "Well, I guess first class." A voice piped up behind me, "If you're traveling with your wife, you cannot go that way. You have to go deluxe." Well, this man seemed to know what he

was talking about, so I said, “Well, all right, deluxe.” So I shelled out for deluxe, which I guess was not too expensive anyway. A few hours thereafter, my wife and I arrived at the train site in Alexandria. I saw this same gentleman who had introduced himself as I left the wicket at the Wagons-Lits Cook. Saw this gentleman who was getting on the train also, leading a very fancy little dog whom he turned over to a chauffer as he got on the train. He recognized me and I introduced my wife. We got on, and he said, “Why don’t you come back to the club car with me?” We accepted his invitation. He turned out to be a Polish textile magnate. Owned textile factory or factories in Alexandria and had been there quite a number of years. He entertained us to scotch for the three or four hour trip.

LC: How wonderful.

JM: To Cairo. We arrived in Cairo, and he said, “Now I’m staying at the very famous Shepard’s Hotel,” which was subsequently, I guess, about a few years later in any case destroyed in a riot by Egyptians in Cairo. He said, “Why don’t you come in and see the hotel and see my quarters?” So we did that. When we were there he said, “I’m going to dine at the Royal Automobile Club. Would you like to have dinner with me?” Well, with not loathe, we went with him for dinner. He pointed out. He said, “This is where King Faruk normally comes for dinner several times a week.” Very fancy dinner. My wife and I had a couple of things, which we encountered only once subsequently in our whole lives. We had sweet lemons, a fruit that looks exactly like a lemon but it’s sweet and not sour, sweet, like an orange.

LC: How wonderful—I’ve never heard of it. How wonderful.

JM: I never had either, but until I got here to Boulder City, Nevada, where we now live. I found that our supermarket for a fancy price carried those.

LC: No kidding.

JM: I got one and it wasn’t good at all.

LC: Oh, too bad.

JM: The other thing we had at the Royal Automobile Club, which I’m not sure I ever did encounter again, was mango ice cream, of course which was also brand new to us. So that was very fancy. Then as we left there, he said, “Why don’t we go dancing at

the roof of the Hotel Continental?" Can you imagine all this from a person we had never met before?

LC: No. Wonderful, how wonderful.

JM: So we went up and danced for a while there. We left him about midnight. We hadn't even checked into this *ponceau* in the middle of the Nile.

LC: Right.

JM: So we got into a taxi, these two young people who had never been abroad at all before in their lives, drove off into the dark night in this exotic and possibly sinister city of Cairo. The taxi driver didn't let us out at where the *ponceau* was, but at that hour there were no lights at the *ponceau*. I rang and rang and rang and finally aroused somebody, told them who were. We're sheepishly and I think sort of angrily admitted. We checked into that *ponceau* between twelve midnight and 1:00AM. To put a footnote to the story of this Polish textile fellow, a couple of nights later, we went with our American friends, the labor attaché and his wife to the Auberge des Pyramides out near the pyramid for dinner and dancing. It turned out that our American friends knew him and he was at the same table with us, but we never saw him again subsequently in our lives.

LC: How funny.

JM: This was our, Nonie's and my, introduction to exotic life abroad. Can you imagine an encounter like this?

LC: You went first class. It sounds—

JM: Actually, I went deluxe, actually.

LC: Oh, deluxe. Yes. Absolutely. (Laughs)

JM: But we never even sat in it, we sat in the club car the whole trip to Cairo.

LC: You're so right. You're so right, Joe. Joe, let me ask you just a question or two. The Royal Automobile Club that was, I take it, a British dining club?

JM: I suppose it must have been founded by the British. I would imagine so.

LC: Was it in a hotel or in its own building? Do you recall?

JM: You know, I can't really, but I think it was in its own building.

LC: You were being led around, probably.

JM: Exactly. We knew nothing about what we were doing there at all.

LC: You just followed. But it sounds as if it was a wonderful place.

JM: I might add just a little bit of fact. At that time, it looked to my wife and me as we traveled around Cairo we went to the bazaars and we bought one object in the bazaars for a dollar because my—I'm looking at it right now, as matter of fact, as I sit here.

LC: No kidding. Oh, how wonderful.

JM: That was all we could afford to the disgust of the bazaar shopkeepers, of course.

LC: What was it? What is it, Joe?

JM: It's—well, it's basically a little copper thing which we—it's not an ashtray, but it could be used as an ash receptacle which has some silver inlay in it. It's probably obviously worth a great deal more than the dollar we paid for it at that time.

LC: Oh, for sure. That's actually a wonderful story, too. But you were going around?

JM: We also went with our American friend and his wife one night to a belly dance institution, and saw that famous Egyptian cultural phenomenon.

LC: That's right.

JM: Then we went back to Cairo—back to Alexandria after several days in Cairo. We did get to the pyramids. I remember a fellow leading a camel came up and wanted to put my wife on the camel. I bargained seriously with him because I had heard that you have to be very careful what they charge if you haven't fixed the price beforehand. After she got finished with the camel ride, she came back to me and I paid the guy. He said, "Oh, no. You've got to pay me much more." That was the experience which we also subsequently had with certain people around the world. Then we went back to Alexandria for one night. We got on our little Turkish vessel, very small, called the *Aksu*, A-K-S-U, which really means "sweet waters" in Turkish, which was so small it was scheduled to take six days to cross from Alexandria to Istanbul with stops in Piraeus and in Izmir. My wife was rather looking forward to that because she said, "This is going to be much smaller, and even though it's a small Turkish vessel, it may be better than the troop-ship-type of thing we had coming over the ocean."

LC: Right.

JM: But within an hour out of Alexandria, we were in either long swells or waves. By one hour out of the city my poor wife was already seasick. She also found herself suffering from that disease which many people pick up when they go to some of these exotic locales, you know what I mean.

LC: Yes. I believe I do, yes.

JM: Then she found she was being bitten by bedbugs.

LC: Oh, Lord.

JM: All in the same evening. We called the Turkish steward into the bedroom, and he wouldn't believe it when we told him. She had to strip down and show him the welts.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: To prove that she had bedbugs. So he came in and got some kind of spray, probably DDT, and sprayed our cabin to get rid of them. Then we had no further trouble for the six days. But that was our first encounter with—my fist encounter with bedbugs. Actually my wife had had an encounter about a year earlier in your state of Texas when she and a college classmate were crossing the U.S. from one side to the other by car. They stopped in Big Bend, Texas. I think they had been staying in motels, and they said, "Well, tonight we'll splurge in Big Bend. We'll stay in the hotel." I think they got bedbugs in the hotel there that evening.

LC: (Laughs) Oh, that's not a good thing to note Texas for. But at any rate—

JM: Anyway, we stopped in Piraeus for some time, long enough to take a taxi with another Foreign Service couple on the same ship with us who were likewise going to Istanbul. The four of us went up to Athens. I think we were able to spend an hour on the Acropolis before we had to go back to Piraeus and board our ship. So that was our first glimpse of this magnificent site in Athens.

LC: Joe, were you taking photographs? You or your wife?

JM: I am not a cameraman. I subsequently acquired a camera some years later, but I was so bad. I always jerk a camera when I take a picture. I usually wound up with half of what I was getting. Finally the film got stuck in the camera. I said, "That's enough. I'll throw it away and I'll never have another one," and I never have since. We buy guidebooks and postcards when we travel rather than taking our own pictures.

LC: There you go. What was the state of the Acropolis at the time you were there? Had it been—had it sustained any damage during the course of the recent conflict?

JM: I don't recall that it had sustained any damage. I can't remember now, but it undoubtedly was not as neat and clean as it was many years later when we visited it again. But I don't believe it had been damaged during the war. The great damage to it, of course, to the Parthenon occurred I think around 1628 or '30 when the Venetians were at war with the Turks. The Turks had stored ammunition in the Parthenon. A shell hit the Parthenon and that's what—I think up to that time, it even had a ceiling, I believe.

LC: It had had some—yeah, structural integrity up to and including the roof, yes.

JM: I think that was probably much more destructive than World War II had been.

LC: Which is an interesting perspective if you think of it.

JM: Yes. Although I mentioned before that the harbor at Naples was still filled with rusting hulks of ships. I'm sure there were some in the harbor at Piraeus, although I can't specifically remember

LC: Were there a number of, if you will, tourists visiting that day?

JM: Not many.

LC: Do you recall?

JM: Not many. Oh, I know one thing that I was going to mention about Egypt that slipped my mind when I got to it. We noticed in Cairo that it struck us that about ninety percent of the children were suffering from trachoma, with pus flowing out of their eyes and flies crawling all over them. Terrible, a terrible thing to see. When we went back through Cairo with the Italian tour group in 1983, which would have been what, thirty-seven years later? We saw none of this. There had been an immense improvement in that respect, as well as a number of other respects in Egypt over the decades. I just thought of it. It's worth noting that for the progress, a sign of the progress that had been made, as in so many other countries.

LC: Yes. Yes, absolutely. How did you know that that was the disease? Did you discuss that with anyone?

JM: Well, I think we had read about it, I think so. It was clearly recognizable the moment we saw it. It was so prevalent, a horrible thing to see.

LC: Yeah. But I am glad that you mentioned it, yes.

JM: Then we had a brief stop in Izmir before we arrived in Istanbul. We arrived—the ship arrived in a harbor of Istanbul on a Sunday morning after daybreak, and we—can you hear me?

LC: Yes, absolutely. Yes, Joe, I can. Go ahead.

JM: Okay. I don't know, maybe you had slipped away. We arrived after daybreak, that is, and could see as we approached Istanbul, see this magnificent silhouette of minarets in the city, which is—Istanbul is one of the greatest cities to approach from the sea. It's actually the Sea of Marmara that I know, absolutely splendid. That image has always stuck in our mind. Less fortunate, we arrived in Istanbul with one dollar left of our two hundred dollars.

LC: Just in time.

JM: Just in time. Fortunately two vice consuls from the consulate general of Istanbul met us—came on board the ship. The first thing I raised was, "Is there any way of getting an advance on my salary?" Because at that time, though we had a per diem for traveling, there was no—let's see, what did we call it—temporary lodging allowance to provide for a hotel stay until one found permanent quarters on arriving at post. The hotel had to be paid for by the individual. The State Department didn't. Later, there was such an allowance instituted. Not then.

LC: Okay. So you were on your own.

JM: They were able to get me an advance, thank God. Actually, I hadn't been paid. I call it an advance. I hadn't been paid obviously for the month we had been on board ship and I don't know how long before that. So I was really owed some money anyway. But anyway, our financial problems were temporarily relieved. We spent the first two weeks in the hotel. I'm trying to think of the name of it. It was right next to the consulate general. It had been the leading hotel at Istanbul before World War II, but another hotel, a fancier one had been built in the meantime. This hotel had a famous incident during World War II. A bomb went off in the corner of the dining room. The

Germans accused the British of setting it. The British accused the German von Papen, a very famous Nazi was the German ambassador to Turkey.

LC: Yes. Okay.

JM: The British accused von Papen of setting it because the British—we never did find out what the true story was, but by the time we got to this hotel the blast damage on the outside had been repaired, but the dining room had never been reopened. So we had to take all our meals out, but the hotel was somewhat rundown. It still showed signs of its old glamour. The bathroom was large and completely made of marble. We had a view down over the Golden Horn. Now since most of the—whatever listeners you eventually get to this will not know the configuration of waters in Istanbul. The Sea of Marmara flows into the Bosphorus, and the Bosphorus into the Black Sea. I shouldn't say—the flow was generally in the other direction.

LC: Yes.

JM: But just off the point where the Sea of Marmara meets the Bosphorus, there is another body of water extending out called the Golden Horn, which I'm sure you've heard of, Laura.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: The Golden Horn separates Old Istanbul from New Istanbul. Now, New Istanbul dates from the Genoese and Venetian period in the 1200 and 1300s. So it's not all that new.

LC: Right, it's all relative.

JM: But the old Byzantine part, as well as the Ottoman part, the succeeding Ottoman part of what was then Constantinople, lay on one side of the Golden Horn. This newer, medieval part, it was founded in the medieval era, part of Istanbul was on the other side of it. But our hotel overlooked, we could see in the distance, see the Golden Horn. So it was a very good introduction to Istanbul.

LC: Yes, absolutely. You had a view of the center of the city and the life of—

JM: Well, we were just about a block removed from what was the main part. We were in what I called the newer part of Istanbul. We were about a block removed from the main shopping and commercial street in the city.

LC: Was that where the consulate general was located?

JM: Yes, the consulate was right next door to the hotel. Actually, it was separated by a building which I think was an office for the water or the gas works. Actually that building was subsequent to our tour in Istanbul, was also taken over by the American government as part of the consulate general. So they were adjacent to each other.

LC: What kind of a building was the original con gen building?

JM: It had been a—let me start this way. Until 19—let me make sure I got this right. Till the end of the Ottoman era, which was 1924 when Ataturk ousted the last sultan, Constantinople had been the capitol of the Ottoman Empire. So all embassies were then in Constantinople. The consulate general building had been, I believe the embassy. I'm not sure. It may have been, was it the embassy or the residence or maybe both were, the embassy and the residence of the ambassador it may have been. But it was like a large villa or house.

LC: Of what age, Joe?

JM: Oh, I assume that it must have been constructed in either the nineteenth century or the very early part of the twentieth century.

LC: Okay.

JM: Let's see. The front part of that building was still, when I arrived there and throughout my tour of two-and-a-half years, was reserved as a residence for the ambassador when he came down from Ankara because Ataturk in 1924 after ousting the sultan and renaming Constantinople Istanbul, moved the capitol to Ankara, which was more centrally located and he felt much more Turkish. Subsequently, he went through all his reforms, changed the alphabet overnight from Arabic to the Latin alphabet, abolished the fez on men, the veil on women, and engaged in some of the greatest social transformations in a short period of time that had never been accomplished in history.

LC: Great, yes. Great reformer, known as a great reformer. Yes.

JM: Anyway, the front part of the building was reserved as residence—the upstairs as residence for the ambassador when he came down on his visits to what was then by that time Istanbul. The lower section of the front part had the consul general's office and a few other offices, but most of the offices were in, well, what I call an "L" off the main building. That was just two floors. The consular section and the administrative

section were on the top floor. The economic and commercial section was in the basement. We were relegated to the basement, although one of my consuls general subsequently changed that. He said, "Look, you people are receiving businessmen, American and local, and you should be in somewhat better quarters." So he moved the consular section and the administrative section downstairs and put us up on the first floor.

LC: I suppose that was an improvement for you and for working conditions?

JM: Yes. Now let me tell you about my assignment within the consulate general. Shortly after arriving, we learned that either myself or the other vice consul, who had been on the ship with us, Ed Revenus, would be assigned the one political job in the consulate general. Well, even though we were novices, we already knew that the favored avenue to success in the Foreign Service was the political ladder. We both wanted the job. The ambassador came down shortly after our arrival, interviewed both of us, and to my great disappointment, my colleague got it in a decision which I couldn't really criticize because the ambassador based this decision on the fact that though I had a perfect reading knowledge of French, I had never spoken it in my life and was scared to do so. Whereas my colleague had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the armed forces and had been a liaison officer with the French forces during the latter part of the war. So he got the job.

LC: He must have been considerably older than you.

JM: He was three or four years older, right. Actually, as it turned out the decision was probably a good one from my standpoint because the political job in Istanbul was really a very limited one. The government was in Ankara, and really virtually all the political work was done at the embassy. The main thing that the political officer in the consulate general was used for was to maintain contact with and report on the head of the Greek Orthodox Church because the head of that church was still resident in Istanbul, interestingly enough.

LC: Very interesting.

JM: Since the civil war in Greece had already broken out between the communists and the non-communists, and the Greek Orthodox Church still had relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, it was of considerable political interest that U.S. maintained some kind of contact with the head of Greek Church and his big retinue in

Istanbul. That was the main function of the political officer, whereas from an economic and commercial standpoint, all of the non-government aspects of economic work centered in Istanbul rather than Ankara. So we had the main contact with the bankers, the financial community, and the business community there.

LC: So you were plenty busy?

JM: So I was plenty busy, although, even though I had taken quite a number of economics courses in college, I found they hadn't really prepared me at all for the kind of work which I was engaged. So I almost had to learn my way from the ground up in the substantive area. At the same time, as I later came to realize, in any country where one arrives newly stationed, it takes a while to find one's way around to become really effective and fruitful from the standpoint—from a work standpoint. Plus, the fact that I was a brand-new officer and not only knew very little about economics, I knew very little about how to operate in the Foreign Service environment. So I had to learn my way around. I must say for the first several months, I can't say I was tremendously effective. Looking back on it, I probably didn't feel that way at the time. The main thing that I can remember doing was supervise—we had four Greek employees in the economic section, local employees who knew their way around the business community extremely well. One or two of them were really very effective people. But the main thing—and they prepared a lot of the reports, often in French. The main thing I did, since I knew French very well, from a reading and written standpoint, was to make sure that the English translation was correct. I remember one of them got a report on the radio industry and market in Turkey from some businessman, all written in very good French. I guess the biggest thing I did during that period was to translate that report into English and send it in. I will also add that there was one other officer in the economic and commercial section, an old-timer who had originally been in the commercial service of the Department of Commerce, Foreign Commercial Service for the Department of Commerce, before it was integrated into the State Department in 1939. He had been integrated with the others. So, he had lots of economic and particularly commercial experience, but he gave me absolutely no training or guidance whatsoever as a brand-new officer.

LC: Now to what do you attribute that, Joe? Was that his personality?

JM: It was his personality completely. He was a very withdrawn individual. I actually didn't—even though we were the only two officers, I didn't even have that much contact with him, and never any cordial contact and never any indication really of what I should be doing in order to adjust and learn and so on.

LC: He was not your superior or anything?

JM: Yeah. He was my superior.

LC: He was?

JM: He was my superior because he was an older officer. He was a Class 4 Officer and I was a new Class 6 Officer, which was then the lowest rank in the Foreign Service officer category.

LC: So, but you operated completely independently although—

JM: Well, he in general told me what he wanted me to do, the things I just described, none of which was particularly important or particularly challenging. He didn't introduce me to—he introduced me to one person in the economic and commercial field in the eight months he and I were together there. That was a Dutch banker since—this officer's wife was Dutch. He had come to know this banker and his wife quite well and invited my wife and me for dinner one evening with them. Now that's the only contact he ever introduced me to during that eight month's period. He was transferred and I found myself alone. So I really had to sink or swim.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: One of the things that I had to undertake, he wrote a monthly financial report on non-government, all aspects of non-government finance, and particularly on foreign exchange and credit, because the biggest thing that American exporters were interested in in Turkey as they were in most other foreign countries at that stage, "How much do they have in the way of dollars?" Because, that was the period of the great dollar shortage, since none of these countries emerged from the war with any dollars to speak of, and Americans, of course, wanted to be paid in dollars. So the big question was, "How many dollars do they have and what chance do I have of getting them and how can my distributor get his hands on them?" So that was one of the main things we had to be interested in in the monthly financial reports to Washington. So I started without any previous guidance or training, interviewing bankers myself for this monthly report and

preparing it. Evidently I did an acceptable and perhaps better job because I got a number of commendations from both the embassy and from Washington, particularly from the Department of Commerce. Then shortly after I took over on my own, the embassy in Ankara received an instruction from the State Department, "Provide us a comprehensive assessment of the reciprocal trade treaty," which had been concluded between the United States and Turkey under Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of State Cordell Hull's reciprocal trade program. "Assessment of how effective that has been in increasing trade between the U.S. and Turkey." So again, without any previous experience in this field, I had to—the embassy sent this down to us for action rather than doing it themselves.

LC: Right. Right.

JM: I had to proceed to draw up this assessment. What I did was rely mainly on the trade statistics, Turkish and American, which I could find. My conclusion was that it hadn't really made very much difference, partly, of course, because World War II had intervened during half the period, more than half the period had been in effect. Trade had not really increased that much as a result of it. It had not really contributed very much to an increase in trade between the U.S. and Turkey because so many factors that were not foreseen or known at the time the agreement was concluded had intervened, as you can see particularly because of World War II.

LC: Yes. Were you relying—you mentioned the statistics, but did you also rely on your contacts in the Istanbul banking community?

JM: Well, you know that kind of historical thing, the contacts weren't particularly useful for that sort of thing.

LC: Okay. So this was—

JM: The statistics were really better in determining whether in terms of total volume and in terms of volume of individual commodities if there had been any substantial difference.

LC: So this was quantitative reporting?

JM: Right.

LC: Primarily.

JM: Yes.

LC: Were there other reports that on a regular basis you had to provide?

JM: No, these were the—the monthly [financial] one was the main one on a regular basis, but then I decided on my own to undertake several special reports.

LC: Yes.

JM: Which, however immodestly I put this, made my reputation from my—in the economic and commercial field as far as the embassy was concerned and also as far as Washington was concerned, and I'll tell you what they were.

LC: Please do.

JM: First, I drew up a comprehensive report on the Turkish import system because at that time, all imports were subject to both import licenses and foreign exchange licenses. They differed a great deal from product to product, country to country, and so forth. So this was a pretty complex system to outline, but it was quite useful to American exporters.

LC: I would think. Yes.

JM: To know what exactly what the system was.

LC: Yes.

JM: Then I drew up another one on the Turkish export system, same kind of comprehensive description of the system and analysis of it. Then another on a type of trade which was, I think, almost totally unfamiliar to Americans. You may remember from your historical studies that Nazi Germany, particularly under the impulse of—what was his name, Schacht, the economic czar of Nazi Germany?

LC: I believe so, yes.

JM: I think that was his name.

LC: Economic minister.

JM: He negotiated a lot of what [are] called "clearing pacts" with various countries around the world, including Turkey. Clearing pacts provided for imports and exports from both countries. Since Germany wasn't willing to accept Turkish currency and the Turks didn't have much in the way of foreign exchanges to spend for German goods, what they would do, they would sort of counterbalance these things. Instead of direct barter trade, there would be a clearing account in a bank, into which a Turkish importer would pay Turkish lira. When a German buyer of exports from Turkey paid for those exports in German marks, he would pay into a counterpart account in Germany.

The two banks would interchange and balance those. Then the German exporter to Turkey would get his payment in marks. The Turkish exporter would get his payment in Turkish lira. This certainly resulted in some increase in trade as far as Germany, considerable increase in trade, I think, as far as Germany was concerned. But we in the States did not resort to that sort of thing during this period of very difficult economic and trading conditions. So I went into that and also into what the Turks called "compensation trading," which was related. It was closer to barter than the clearing agreement. I thought that in case any Americans should be interested in trying this sort of thing, since Turks had very few dollars, they ought to know what the system was and if they did want to engage in it, because the Turks would try to foster the exportation particularly of products that were difficult to sell. They wouldn't—products that were easy to sell they wouldn't put [under] this agreement because then they could get dollars or other foreign exchange for them. But products difficult to sell, they would put on this special list because they thought that if a man really wants to, a foreigner wants to export to us, he might be interested in buying these products. So that was the third report. Then my fourth one, and probably in some ways the most important of all, was a report on the system for foreign investment in Turkey. That also was subject to many regulations on the part of the Turkish government. One of the things, of course, that interested any potential American investor was, "Will I be able to get my profits out in dollars? If I want to sell my business, will I be able to get my capital back?" So all this I went into in great detail. I was very interested to find that this remained the standard reference for both the State and Commerce Departments on investment in Turkey for about ten years. So I've always been rather proud of that.

LC: I should think.

JM: I wrote this—I did quite a good deal of interviewing of businessmen, particularly American businessmen who were in Turkey already as investors before I wrote this one. Then after I wrote it, I remember I showed the draft to one or two businessmen to see whether they had any additional comments. I was very pleased with the reaction I got from them, even though they knew the ropes. They were very—they were quite willing to work with this and interested in the fact that I had done it.

LC: You were, if I understand correctly, documenting the obstacles and the particular regulations, licensure agreements and so forth that foreign investors particularly Americans would have to deal with?

JM: Yes. Exactly.

LC: This was, if I'm correct, Joe, in thinking back at the time you were writing this, this would have been pretty much *terra incognita* for American investors?

JM: Exactly. It was. As far as Washington was concerned, they had no information on this. So this was a completely original product on my part.

LC: Also an original idea to go out and create the product as well as the creation itself.

JM: Exactly.

LC: No one instructed—this wasn't an action memo that you got that you responded to.

JM: No. No. These four reports I described, I decided what were then called "voluntary reports." I engaged in this voluntarily without any instructions from either the embassy or Washington. As a matter of fact, I learned after—I guess it was after the import system reports, there was some resentment in the economic section of the embassy in Ankara because one of the officers there had started, had launched on the same thing. I didn't even know that, but mine went in ahead of his so he just had to drop his. So I suppose that was understandably human. He didn't particularly appreciate that since I hadn't really coordinated this with the embassy at Ankara before I sent in the final report.

LC: Right. Joe, just to flesh out the organization in Ankara, who was the ambassador when you arrived?

JM: Edwin C. Wilson, who was a—an old-line ambassador, but a very effective one. He had been in North Africa at the time of the American invasion in the fall of 1942 as one of the advisors to General Eisenhower. I think Murphy was the senior advisor and Wilson was on his staff, probably the number two. I think Turkey was his first ambassadorial appointment. He came to Turkey in 1944 and left in '48. He was there for four years. He was there throughout the period of the initiation of the Greek-Turkish Aid Program. Shall I say anything about how significant that program was in terms of U.S. foreign policy?

LC: I think you should go ahead and do that now. That would be very good.

JM: This program, which was approved by President—initiated and approved by President Truman and subsequently sanctioned by Congress, particularly with appropriations, was a brand-new departure for American foreign policy. This was late '46, early '47. Truman had pulled a good many of the U.S. forces out of Europe at the end of World War II. He had discontinued a lot of the wartime agencies. There was no assurance that the United States either in its government or with the support of the population would be prepared to sustain an international role, which it had not done, as you recall, after World War I until the first great step was the Greek-Turkish Aid Program. The second was the Marshall Plan. The third, I suppose, was the Berlin Airlift, the fourth was NATO. Those were the four great steps which committed the United States, I trust for ever after in its history to a leading international role. The reason the Greek-Turkish aid program was the first was because the British, who had been the main support of the non-communist world in that area of the Mediterranean, decided in 1946 that they no longer had the resources to do it. They informed us of this fact and said "If anything's going to be done, you're going to have to do it. You, the United States, are going to have to take it over." Now that was at the time the Greek Civil War, which I mentioned between the non-communists and the communists broke out, which for a time was very dire that the communists might take over Greece as well as all the rest of Southeastern Europe, which they held at that point. The Soviets were also putting very substantial pressure on Turkey. They were demanding the cession of two Turkish provinces in the east to the Soviet Union and demanding a lot of rights with respect to passage through the straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The ultimate aim, as the Russian aim had been for centuries, was to try to get control of Istanbul because of its control of the straits. So the Greek-Turkish Aid Program was designed to counter these immense Soviet expansionist pressures. Their approval both by the president and by Congress was the first big step in the U.S., what has been U.S. foreign policy now for sixty years.

LC: This was the financial and economic underpinning of the Truman Doctrine, really, which was essentially formed around the issue of Greece, and then expanded later. Is that fair, Joe?

JM: What was that again? I thought you said the Germans.

LC: No, the Truman Doctrine.

JM: Oh, the Truman Doctrine. Sorry.

LC: Yes, this is actually—

JM: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

LC: Yes. This is the sort of making—

JM: This was the beginning of it.

LC: Yes, the making real of the Truman Doctrine.

JM: That's right. I don't think—by that point it hadn't even been labeled 'Truman Doctrine."

LC: No.

JM: I think that expression came into being into use later.

LC: Yes. That's a historian's euphemism.

JM: Right.

LC: But as you point out, you were—

JM: You asked me about the ambassador, Ambassador Wilson.

LC: Yes.

JM: I went on to the Greek-Turkish Aid Program because he and our ambassador in Greece were both called back to testify in Congress before these programs, the [two] programs, were adopted. He made an extremely effective presentation and managed to, I think, convince quite a number of members of the Senate and the House to go along with him.

LC: Had he been a State Department person from years back?

JM: Oh, I think so. Yes. He was a career Foreign Service officer.

LC: Okay, but this was his first ambassadorial appointment?

JM: This was his first ambassadorial post. Now, I'll just add a little postscript to that. When my wife and I came back from Istanbul in 1949 for home leave in the States for a couple of months, Ambassador Wilson and his wife were then living in retirement. He'd been retired for about a year in Washington. We went and had tea with them. He told me a very interesting thing. He said that he had been offered the ambassadorship to the Soviet Union when his tour in Turkey was up in 1948, but he had decided to decline

because he said, “There was really nothing I could hope to do with respect to Stalin,” which I think was a very accurate and realistic assessment. So he said, “I chose not to put myself into a position that was actually hopeless as far as the effectiveness was concerned.”

LC: And powerless.

JM: Powerless.

LC: He would have felt powerless.

JM: You might be interested, Laura—

LC: Very.

JM: I had another famous ambassador make an analogous remark to me in, I think this was 1963. You heard of Charles “Chip” Bohlen.

LC: Of course. That’s in fact who I was just thinking of.

JM: He was ambassador to France.

LC: Yes.

JM: He was back in the State Department in 1963 on consultation and asked for a briefing on Vietnam. I was told to go give him the briefing. I did at considerable length, and he said—during the process, he says, “You know, I was asked by the president to go in and talk to de Gaulle and try to convince him to support our policy on Vietnam.” He said, “I just declined to do so because it was absolutely hopeless. I had no hope whatsoever of convincing de Gaulle to follow our policy.” So he said, “I declined and Washington accepted that view.”

LC: Was he saying that that had happened just recently?

JM: Yes. That happened quite—this was [’64].

LC: It had happened in [’64]?

JM: Oh, yes. It had happened shortly before.

LC: Because I know that he was very close to the president, to President Kennedy.

JM: Yes, right.

LC: That’s very interesting.

JM: I thought I would add that little vignette

LC: I’m very glad you did.

JM: Good.

LC: Joe, let’s take a break.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [5] of [57]
Date: May 28, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the 28th of May 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. The ambassador joins me by phone from Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: I think we wanted to make a couple of additions to the record that we have already created.

JM: One correction and one addition.

LC: Okay. All right. Start with the correction then, and we'll go from there.

JM: The correction is I mentioned in our last interview that in 1946 my wife on a cross-country tour with a friend picked up a bedbug in a hotel in Big Bend, Texas. The place was erroneous. It was Big Spring, Texas. I'm not even sure there is a town called Big Bend. I think you do have a Big Bend in the Rio Grande River. Maybe there's a town there, too, called Big Bend. I'm not sure.

LC: If there is a town, they'll be grateful for this clarification.

JM: I also wanted to add that in addition to the bedbug that my wife picked up on the Turkish ship from Alexandria, Egypt, to Istanbul en route to Turkey in November of '46 during our two-and-a-half year tour in Turkey, we picked up bedbugs a couple of additional times, once in a movie theater in Istanbul and once in a hotel in Izmir. But I also want to hasten to add that subsequent visits to Texas as well as extensive tours as a tourist, my wife and me in Turkey in the interior of Turkey in 1982, 1989, and 1997, yielded no repeat of those experiences. So obviously Texas, Turkey, and Egypt, as I mentioned the last time with respect to trachoma in children, all had greatly improved in the intervening years.

LC: They're all off the hook now.

JM: Exactly. They're all very worthy of tourist visits.

LC: Absolutely. Sir, we had, I'm sure you recall, had talked about the reports, the particularly important economic reporting that you had done at your posting in Istanbul. I wonder if you have any additional anecdotes or stories about your time in Istanbul that you'd like to—

JM: I do, as a matter of fact, Laura.

LC: Okay, very good.

JM: You had asked me about the ambassadors under which I served in Turkey. I gave you an extremely favorable assessment of Amb. Edwin Wilson, who was the chief of mission during most of the time I was there. During the last few months of my tour, he was succeeded by Amb. George Wadsworth. He was a noted figure in the Foreign Service. I think he had altogether five ambassadorial posts in his career, but at that period in the Foreign Service, a chief of mission could operate quite arbitrarily. He did, as a matter of fact. He scarcely ever went to the office. He operated out of the residence. He would start work, as I understood it—I was, remember, in Istanbul. So I didn't work directly under him in the embassy in Ankara. But he would start to work as I understood it in the evening and continue until about 3:00 or 4:00AM, calling staff members out of bed into the residence as he needed them. These poor fellows had put in their full eight hours or longer during the day at the embassy, but then have to get out of bed at his beck and call. So he had some quirks in his method of operation, which may be interesting to any potential Foreign Service officers. I doubt that this exists today any longer. I will add that during my tour in Turkey, I had never been to Ankara until the last weekend I was there in May 1949. The embassy insisted my wife and I take a train and come up before I left. Ambassador Wadsworth, whom I had not met, invited us for cocktails, the rest of us, just the two of us. He sat and talked with us. It was clear that he was familiar with the financial reporting I had done from Istanbul. He made a very interesting suggestion to me. He said, "In the Foreign Service, we have"—at that time, this is [1949]—"We have only one financial expert among all Foreign Service officers." He mentioned his name. That man, incidentally, left the Foreign Service shortly thereafter and joined the International Monetary Fund, I believe, as the number two official in that fund. But he said to me, "I urge you to specialize in finance in the Foreign Service because we really need experts in that field." I thought that was a rather wise observation

coming from him. To a degree, I did follow his advice. Now other things that I would like to talk about with respect to the tour in Turkey, I had three consuls general in Istanbul, the officials in charge of the office there. The first one was very much a senior old-line Foreign Service officer, extremely pleasant. I worked under him I suppose for about three or four months. He never seemed to do a great deal except to work on a dispatch to the department about the fact that his personal effects had been lost in, I think it was in Belgrade during the war and he was trying to get reimbursement for them. But he was—after three or four months there, he was assigned by the State Department, reassigned from Istanbul to become consul general in Jerusalem. That immensely increased my respect for him because he made no hesitation about moving to Jerusalem. Our consul general in Jerusalem, the one he was replacing, had just been killed by Israeli terrorists in Jerusalem, when they—actually the organization that was headed by Begin, the man who later became Prime Minister of Israel, set a bomb in a principle hotel, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which killed the consul general among others. MacAtee, which was the name of our consul general in Istanbul, accepted this reassignment without any protestation. That immensely increased my respect for the man because he was obviously moving into an extremely dangerous situation in [Palestine] at that point, just as dangerous then as it is today, as a matter of fact, in Israel.

LC: Joe, can I clarify his last name was spelled how?

JM: M-A-C-A-T-E-E.

LC: Okay, MacAtee.

JM: Robert MacAtee.

LC: The bomb that was placed—we had a little static, so I just want to clarify that was the Begin's group?

JM: Yes, exactly. Begin was the head of this terrorist group in Israel at that point. I think it was the Irgun, I-R-G-U-N, as I recall.

LC: I think that sounds right.

JM: Which Begin headed and which that's the bomb that killed David Watson, who was our consul general.

LC: Yes. That sounds right.

JM: I was deeply impressed by that series of events at my young age. He was succeeded by a man by the name of [Clarence] Macy. Macy had been consul—I think was just consul, rather than consul general in Karachi in Pakistan for nine years and then briefly consul in Tahiti when he was named by the State Department to be consul general in Istanbul. He was a Class 3 officer when our highest numbered class was 1. Macy had not advanced too far. He proved in my estimation to be a man with as much common sense as I've ever encountered in any individual and should in my view have risen higher. He had to retire while he was in Istanbul because he reached the age limit of sixty. I felt he, because of his common sense, he should have risen much higher. But there was one reason in particular that he did not rise farther. He had a French wife. He had served in the U.S. Army occupation forces in Rhineland in Germany after World War I. Somehow had met this French lady, married her. She was the kind of person who tended to be very pleasant with subordinates, but the moment she found herself in touch with her husband's superiors, she was a B-I-T-C-H. I won't pronounce it. (Laughs)

LC: Okay. Okay.

JM: That of course, it rebounded I think against her husband's advancement to a higher career.

LC: Joe, that's an interesting story, and I wonder if you can just say whether—if you can assess in general how important wives were to male Foreign Service officers?

JM: At that time, wives were considerably more important as far as the rating system was concerned. Actually, I think I should mention that my wife at one point in Istanbul in a social mix-up alienated the wife of my immediate superior in the economic section.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: In my efficiency report, the statement was made by the superior that my wife lacked tact.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: So all the wives got rated as much as officers did. I don't think that occurred—I think even by the time I retired from the Foreign Service that was no longer the case. Only the officer was to be rated in the report.

LC: It's very interesting, though. Yes. Yes.

JM: Then the final consul general I had was a man by the name of McDonald. He was there, came during my last few months. He had been the consul general in Taipei in Taiwan before it became the capital of Nationalist China. He came directly from there. A very pleasant man, I can't say a great deal about him. I don't think he advanced much farther beyond the consulate general in Istanbul. But he was a very pleasant person to work for. So there are my three consuls general. I also would like to mention something about life in Istanbul between 1946 and 1949.

LC: Please. Yes.

JM: I had said earlier that my wife and I, after we were married and were in Washington for four months before our first foreign assignment, could not find an apartment anywhere in Washington. Had to live in a single room, take all our meals out including breakfast. Well, we arrived in Istanbul to find that the housing shortage was just as great as it was in Washington. We did manage, after a couple of weeks in a hotel, to find a World War I pre-fabricated shack to rent. We took one look at it. The little tiny living room was covered with—an Arab had been living in it on a rental basis. We replaced the—I guess he had wallpapered the living room with huge bunches of grapes in the wallpaper. All the floors had linoleum on them. So my wife took a look at this, and even though we didn't have much money, she said, "I want that paper ripped off." We went to the market in Istanbul and bought something. I even remember the Turkish name for it, called *cevisboya*, which was a walnut stain and got down on our hands and knees and stained the floor after the linoleum was ripped up. This—I'll tell you some more things about this little house.

LC: Yes.

JM: In the winter, and winter can be fairly severe in Istanbul, our only heat was a pot-bellied stove in the living room. Now that stove was either so hot when it was on that it cooked [us], or if it was out, we froze. So there wasn't much margin in between those two extremes. I'll also mention that at one point, the double bed which in my wife and I were sleeping, we woke up in the morning. We found the bed was on a bias. One of the legs of the bed had gone through the rotten wooden floor.

LC: (Laughs) Oh, dear.

JM: I'll mention also that we had our first child in Istanbul. I wanted the owner of the house to enclose—we had a porch, which rather was the front of the house. I wanted him to enclose that to make a little nursery because there was no place for this child to be put. He absolutely refused. We had to do it at our own expense. We had to build the nursery on the front porch. We were never reimbursed for that.

LC: Dear.

JM: Oh, and I might also add, we had water, running water in the house twelve hours a day. The other twelve hours, we had to go out and dip a bucket out of an outside cistern to have water in the house. So that's the kind of condition under which we lived, although we were young enough to put up with it and actually enjoy it.

LC: That's right.

JM: We stayed in that house for the whole two-and-a-half years we were there and enjoyed it.

LC: It's interesting when you're young, the things you do and you just don't even think about it. Joe, explain to me a little bit if you can about the water system. Was this a municipal policy?

JM: It was a municipal water system. There was these daily cut-offs, I think, occurred pretty much, I don't know whether throughout the city, but certainly in our area. We were outside the main part of the city in what the guidebook described as the poorest village along the Bosphorus. I'll give you an indication as to why. Our house as well as three other of these pre-fabricated, World War I pre-fabricated cottages, had been placed on what had once been a Greek Orthodox monastery site. Interestingly, from the street in front of the house, one approached—and our house was the first one on the street, but it was raised. The ground was raised I would say at least fifteen feet above the ground. So sitting on our front porch, we could not see the traffic on the street because we were raised above it. The access to all the houses was through a stone-vaulted corridor, very medieval in its appearance. It sounds rather romantic and was in a sense. We did have a view of the Bosphorus from our little front porch, but on the other side of the street between us and the Bosphorus was the main depot into which all the coal which came from up the Black Sea area of Turkey for Istanbul was unloaded right in front of our house.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: So we could look beyond that and still see the Bosphorus, but we had to overlook the coal depot in order to do so.

LC: Did you get a great deal of coal dust coming up?

JM: No. Strangely enough, I can't say that we did. But we still look back on that little shack with great pleasure as really the first house in our married life.

LC: I'm sure you do. Now was that your daughter that was born there?

JM: That's where the first daughter, yes. Born in 1948.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about the other utilities, since we brought this up. What was the electricity situation?

JM: We did have electricity. I don't recall that we had any particular problems with electricity. I do want to add, Laura, that there was no consular convention between Turkey and the United States. So after our initial shipment from America of anything we wanted in our house in the way of furniture or daily living necessities, we had to live totally on the Turkish economy. That wouldn't be true today, I don't imagine, anywhere. So we learned, for example, to live mainly on lamb and to use olive oil for cooking. I now love both of them, but at that time, I'd had no experience with olive oil and very little experience with lamb. So the change in diet was very substantial as you can see.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: Plus the fact that as far as liquor was concerned, and we had to do—we did entertaining for business purposes, even in our little shack.

LC: Sure.

JM: The only liquor that we had, imported liquor, was what we had brought with us when we arrived. Since we had virtually no money, I think we brought one case of scotch and that was it. Scotch on the Turkish market and all the other liquor had to be bought from the Turkish liquor monopoly. Scotch cost over fifty dollars a bottle. Now that was in 1946 dollars, when my salary was $300 a month.

LC: Ooh.

JM: So obviously, nobody bought scotch in Istanbul.

LC: No. No.

JM: Every cocktail party one went to in Istanbul, we were served with the same thing. It was called a White Lady, which was made from a mixture of Turkish vodka and Turkish cointreau, which we said was designed to take the lining off anybody's stomach. But that was the ubiquitous cocktail at all cocktail parties. That's what we used, as well.

LC: How much would Turkish cointreau cost for you?

JM: I don't know. Obviously those two things were not very expensive, otherwise we couldn't have afforded them. It's what everybody afforded. I might add one little anecdote. General Electric had a resident representative in Istanbul. He was the only person in the whole city who had a freezer. Freezers were then, I think, brand-new everywhere. When he had a cocktail party, he would put his White Ladies into the freezer a day or two in advance and then thaw them out and serve them without any ice. Well, since everybody else had to use ice since we had no freezers, his cocktails were far stronger without any ice. So it was the only parties that we went to in Istanbul which anybody really got tidily, I think, because the drinks were much stronger. (Laughs) I hope you don't mind my telling all this.

LC: I think it's wonderful. I think it's absolutely wonderful. You're the only one who knows these things, you and your wife. So it's very good that we're recording them.

JM: I'll also discuss commuting to work. During the first year-and-a-half I was there, another vice consul, who had one of the shacks in this compound, had a car. We had no car. I used to ride to work with him each morning, but he was transferred the year before I left to Madras in India. Then from then on, I had to take the Turkish ferry down the Bosphorus from our village to the main docking area in Istanbul to go to work. That was—it took me about an hour to commute to work. That ferry could be very pleasant in summer if one could sit outside. But in winter when it was cold, even so-called first class, if one sat inside was fairly smelly, as a matter of fact. I should add also about the commute.

LC: Yes.

JM: After getting off the ferry at Galata Bridge, which was the old main bridge across the Golden Horn between Old Stanboul and the newer section dating from the thirteenth century, which was where our consulate general was located. The ferry docked right underneath the bridge. We got on it and then I walked a few blocks to Istanbul's

only subway. It was really a cable car which went up a hill, about a three-minute ride. That cable had broken a few years earlier and there were a number of fatalities. So one always approached it with a little bit of trepidation. Then I walked from where I got off this little subway about a couple of blocks to the office. It would take me about an hour each way.

LC: How big was that car, that cable car?

JM: I believe it was about two cars, as I recall. It ran obviously very frequently because it was only a three-minute ride. But it was used very extensively by the people of Istanbul. It was quite inexpensive.

LC: Oh, good. So that was something you did more or less every day?

JM: That's something I did every day, including Saturdays, because we worked Saturday mornings as well as—I think we worked seven hours a day, Monday to Friday. To get in the forty hour week, we were open for five hours on Saturday. Unfortunately at the end of the work period on Saturday, which I think was 1:30 or two o'clock, I couldn't get a ferry back to the house because there was none scheduled. That wasn't the regular commute hours. There was none scheduled. So I used to have to ride trams, which went all the way out to our house. They took about an hour from Istanbul to our house. They were usually jammed. I can remember standing on the entry step, with one foot. I couldn't get the second foot on, hanging on through these trams in order to get to our house on Saturday afternoon. I also could take a bus. I remember one day, one Saturday afternoon, when I was riding home, they were in one section of that street going out to our village. There were some trees, thin trees along the street. The bus sideswiped some of those trees, and I could look back and I could see that tree waving back and forth where we sideswiped it.

LC: No kidding.

JM: But I'll also mention with respect to the trams, since we had no car, my wife used to ride the tram coming into town from time to time. No problems except when she became pregnant. Since the Turkish men seem to like their ladies plumper than we do, that's when she began to suffer pinches on the bottom in the tram. (Laughs)

LC: Oh, dear. Now how was her medical care handled during her pregnancy?

JM: There was an American hospital in Istanbul headed by an American missionary doctor with one American nurse. As I recall, her gynecologist was, I believe Greek. I think he was on the staff of the hospital. That's where the hospital—the baby was delivered in the hospital. Incidentally, the baby was born at only four pounds, six ounces, which in the States, she would have been put into an incubator. There were no incubators in Istanbul. She fell to four pounds, two ounces, but recovered very quickly and is now at the age of—let's see—fifty-six—is a very substantial lady.

LC: Very good.

JM: I shouldn't say substantial. That implies a lot of weight. But she grew to be quite a healthy child.

LC: Quite hale and hearty.

JM: Hale and hearty, despite this very small weight at birth, which could have proven fatal.

LC: Yes, absolutely. That was—she was certainly at risk.

JM: Yeah. I also would like to mention our friends in Istanbul.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: We managed to make friends in all of the principle communities in Istanbul, and by that, I mean obviously the Turkish, the Greek, the Armenian, and the Jewish, which were then all three were very substantial minorities in Istanbul. Each oh, somewhere between fifty and a hundred thousand in Istanbul, forming a very considerable part of its population, and the minorities were extremely important in the business world, and since I was doing economic and commercial work, quite important to me as sources of information. One of the couples in particular, whom we became very close to, a Jewish couple whose ancestors had—they were Sephardic Jews whose ancestors had been ousted from Spain in 1492 when Ferdinand and Isabella expelled all the Jews from Spain. That family had come to what was then Constantinople and had been there ever since. He was, this friend of mine, was one of the leading businessmen in Istanbul, represented quite a number of American firms and was both an excellent friend as well a source of information on economic and commercial matters. During our last winter—can you still hear me?

LC: Absolutely, yes, sir. Yes, I can, Joe.

JM: Oh, yeah. During our last winter there, my wife and I together with a Turkish friend and his American wife, used to play charades with this fellow and his wife and another couple. The eight of us, four couples, eight of us would get together frequently on Saturday nights, play until 1:00 or 2:00AM in alternate houses. Now these Istanbul friends could play in seven or eight languages.

LC: Wow.

JM: Obviously, we weren't capable of that, but this was a fascinating experience. Laura, can you still hear me?

LC: Yes, Joe, I can. Can you hear me?

JM: Faintly. Oh, no. The telephone had slipped from my ear a bit. Sorry.

LC: That's okay. No problem.

JM: So you're registering me all right?

LC: Yes, absolutely. I was going to just ask you about this couple and whether at any time—obviously they were very involved in business affairs, but I wonder if at any time, the issue of what had happened to the Jewish communities in Northern Europe during the war came up as a topic. Did they have any views on that?

JM: Well, that scarcely ever came up. What did come up was this. Now, this couple's family had, I think, spoken French at home for generations. My friend, Freddie Bourla said that in the late '30s, this young couple decided that since they had lived in Turkey so long that they should really be speaking Turkish in the home. They knew Turkish very well. So they started to do so, but then during the war when Turkey oscillated between the two sides, it finally joined the Allied side in 1944, when the war had been going for five years. Turkey oscillated, and in 1942 the then Turkish government adopted a couple of extremist measures against the minorities. One thing, it adopted a capital levy tax on assets called the *Varlik*, which was levied quite heavily on minorities but not so much on Turks. Second, the minorities were conscripted into the Turkish army as privates, which at that time was because of the conditions under which they served, was a very low status indeed.

LC: Yes.

JM: My friend had been conscripted for a while. I think after that experience, they switched back to French in the home. But interestingly, we stayed in touch with this

couple until and after the husband died in the late 1990s. We always remained friends. Interestingly, he became so influential and important that he even participated in Turkish government missions to the United States. So obviously, all of this had mellowed and his ability was recognized even by the Turkish government in Ankara and even included in government delegations.

LC: Yes. What was his name, Joe?

JM: Fred Bourla. B-O-U-R-L-A.

LC: Okay. They sound extremely interesting. Were there other friends of yours that you had in Istanbul that you remember particularly?

JM: Oh, yes. I remember our principle Armenian friend, who was a very dashing, gallant fellow as well as a very clever businessman. Was married to a Turkish lady, and he had even Turkified his Armenian name. He dropped the I-A-N, which is I think ubiquitous among Armenians as the end of their name. We knew him and his wife quite well also. He was also a very good source of information. Particularly, I think I mentioned last time, I wrote a report on the special form of trading known in Turkey as compensation.

LC: Yes.

JM: Or a form of barter, a sophisticated form of barter trading. He was my principle source of information on that because he was one of the big figures in that field. We used to see them socially as well quite often. We also had very good friends in the Greek—and his name I can give you, if you'd like.

LC: Sure.

JM: Fuat, F-U-A-T. The Turkish version of his family name, S-U-R-E-N, Suren. Then we also had very good friends in the Greek community, Ted and Roxy Karakash. He was the Istanbul representative for Carrier Air Conditioning, which I guess is still one of the principal firms in that field in the U.S.

LC: Yes.

JM: We were very close friends, again both professionally and personally with them. Their experience was interesting, too. He also was recognized as a very reliable and able businessman. In 1955, when one of the periodic Turkish-Greek conflicts broke out in Cyprus, a Turkish mob in retribution for what the Greeks in Cyprus were doing to

the Turks, launched an attack on the Greek community in Istanbul. As a result of that experience, this friend, Ted Karakash and his wife, these friends left Turkey and went to Geneva. I don't think they ever went back to Turkey. Incidentally, that attack is interesting. There was some speculation that the Turkish government was behind it, which I don't think was true at all, because the attack occurred on the eve of an International Monetary Fund and World Bank meeting, which was scheduled to take place in Istanbul. So the government was extremely embarrassed that this took place on the eve of what would have been a prestigious meeting as far as Turkey was concerned.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: Then as far as the Turkish community was concerned, our closest Turkish friend—I think you'll be interested in this, too.

LC: Okay.

JM: His name was Sadun Tör, S-A-D-U-N and last name T-O-R with an umlaut over the O, which made it pronounced in Turkish "Tör." He had gone to college in the States during World War II and had married an American nurse from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. They lived close to us in Istanbul. We became very close friends. His background is quite fascinating because his father was a member of the Turkish National Assembly still at that time. Old and rather crippled and not very active when Sadun introduced us to his father, but he had been one of the noted lieutenants of Ataturk during the revolution.

LC: No kidding.

JM: In the 1920s. As a matter of fact, when Ataturk needed arms during the Turkish War against the Greeks in 1922-23, Ataturk sent this gentleman, his name was Edip Servet Tör, but we always used the Turkish Edip Servet Bey, Bey being an honorary title. Sent him to Italy to get arms from d'Annunzio, who was then a principal figure in the Fascist movement in Italy. This gentleman was rowed across the Adriatic in a small boat with gold hidden on the boat in order to pay for these arms to take them back to Turkey.

LC: No kidding. No kidding.

JM: So these are romantic experiences that in history, which one can feel some association with, having met and known well the son of the gentleman who did it.

LC: Yes. That's an extremely interesting story. Did he get the arms?

JM: Yes. I think he got the arms. Despite all the risk, he got them and took them back. As you know, I suppose that since many people who might listen to this oral history will not know the history of that war in the early 1920s between the Turks and the Greeks. Turkey, as you know, participated on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I. As a result of the defeat of that group of nations, Turkey was stripped of its Ottoman Empire and threatened to be stripped of much of the basic territory of the Turks themselves. The Greeks, with the encouragement of Lloyd George, then the Prime Minister of Britain, sought to recover their Byzantine supremacy in much of Turkey, including Anatolia. Ataturk had arisen as the principal leader of Turkey in opposition to this attempt to totally dismember Turkey, because I think that's what would have been done. Managed to rally the Turks and defeated the Greeks in this war of 1922-23. That in a nutshell—I could go into much more detail, but that in a nutshell was what happened.

LC: Ataturk is, of course, one of the great Nationalist heroes.

JM: He is *the* great national hero in Turkey.

LC: Right.

JM: He certainly was when we were there and I believe probably still is.

LC: Yes and a very colorful figure personally.

JM: Extremely. Actually, my Turkish friend—Ataturk, when my Turkish friend was young, used to come to their house on unannounced visits or announced or unannounced, because he knew this lieutenant, Sadun's father, very well. Ataturk had quite a reputation as a ladies' man, to put it mildly.

LC: Yes.

JM: Sadun said that when it was known that he was coming, his father would always hide his daughter, Sadun's sister. (Laughs)

LC: Oh, no kidding?

JM: Yes.

LC: Well, I am sure that was quite a wise strategy for him to resort to.

JM: So you see, we picked up a lot of interesting tidbits.

LC: Well, that's right. Absolutely.

JM: That's the way they are.

LC: Well, it certainly was a most interesting time that you were there as well.

JM: It was indeed. Perhaps not quite as fascinating as during World War II itself when Istanbul was very much a center of espionage and nefarious activities by both sides. It still was during the post-war period. I might just mention there, Laura.

LC: Sure.

JM: It was very interesting. When we were in Istanbul, the principal foreign language spoken during all the time we were there was French.

LC: Okay.

JM: German was widely known, but interestingly, no Turk used it during that period. Only at a party after two-and-a-half years in Turkey, a party in a Turkish home, that I heard German spoken by any Turk during the time I had been there. So the Turks obviously knew which side their bread was buttered on. They were being extremely cautious about speaking what was really a widely-known language, perhaps even better known than French, but it was never heard. English was then the third language. Today, of course, it's the first language in Turkey. But back then—

LC: Yes. What was the position of British diplomats in Istanbul while you were there or earlier, if you know any stories from the World War II period?

JM: I mentioned the one last time about the bomb, which blew out a corner of the hotel in which we stayed.

LC: Yes.

JM: The British blamed the Germans. The Germans blamed the British.

LC: Right.

JM: The British had, of course, been extremely active in Turkey for centuries, but it was in '46 that they began to pull in their horns, and that was the reason as I explained the last time for the inauguration of the Greek-Turkish aid program. So the British influence was obviously declining during that period.

LC: The United States was moving, as you've pointed out, into that vacuum.

JM: Exactly. I think we have been the closest foreign ally of Turkey ever since.

LC: Yes, it's been a very stable relationship.

JM: Still are today.

LC: Yes, very stable relationship and certainly one that's extremely important to us.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Certainly now, in strategic terms.

JM: My own assessment is that Turkey has proven to be the second-most important foreign ally we have, after Britain. I think some people might want to argue that, but I feel very strongly that's the case. After all, the Turks participated in the Korean War.

LC: Yes.

JM: During the first Gulf War, despite the economic cost to them, they backed us completely. I know there was some criticism over what happened with respect to the war in Iraq just before the war started, which was I think a surprise, not only to us, but to the Turkish government itself when it lost by three votes in the Turkish National Assembly about authorizing U.S. troops to use Turkey to go into Northern Iraq. Then, of course, subsequently, the Turks said they would make available troops for use during the occupation. But the Iraqi, particularly the Kurds, objected to it. So that idea is at least in abeyance.

LC: Yes. Do the—is there any continuing issue, if you've paid attention to it, about the Kurds in Northern Iraq and the border with Turkey there?

JM: Well, I read something very interesting, I guess a few days ago in the *Wall Street Journal* that Turkish—the Turks who are extremely concerned about the large Kurdish minority within their own borders about its separatist tendencies and therefore have been extremely wary of the increasing autonomy of the Kurds in Iraq, which our role in Iraq has helped to foster.

LC: Yes. That's right.

JM: I read that there are indications now that the Turks are beginning to look in a more friendly manner on what has happened to the Kurds in Northern Iraq and may even begin to cooperate with them. Now I think one has to wait and see whether that happens, but that was the most interesting bit of news about the Turkish-Kurdish relationship that I have seen in recent months.

LC: Yes. I'm glad—

JM: Did you see that?

LC: I did not see it, but I'm very glad that you happened to and that you thought to mention it too, because it's interesting how many of these long-standing issues and problems that confront our allies now also by indirection confront us as well.

JM: Exactly.

LC: When did you find out, Joe, that you would have a new posting?

JM: Well, I think my orders arrived in let's say, February or March of '49. We left Istanbul in May. Well, I'll tell you about our trip home.

LC: Yes.

JM: We had this one child, nine or ten months old. We took a Turkish vessel, the *Istanbul*, from Istanbul to Marseilles, got off the ship there. My wife, inexperienced in rearing children, had insisted upon taking with us a playpen, a potty, a box of food, a box of drugs, and I don't know how much other stuff in addition to our luggage. We shifted from ship in Marseilles to train for an overnight trip to Paris.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: If you can imagine with all that junk.

LC: Yeah.

JM: Because my wife's brother was then serving with the Marshall Plan in Paris and had invited us to come see him on the way home. So we stayed in Paris in his apartment for a couple of weeks and then took a ship from Cherbourg to New York. It was one of the queens. I think it was the *Queen Elizabeth*. Interestingly, as we boarded the ship, my wife, who had this child and she's carrying a basket with clothes, maybe diapers and milk and so forth sticking out of it. As we started to board the ship, the purser took one look at us and said, "Steerage class to the left."

LC: Oh, no.

JM: We turned brightly to the right because we were traveling first class. Then we had this, I suppose the most luxurious crossing we ever had by ship form Cherbourg to New York for five days on the *Queen Elizabeth*.

LC: Can you describe the ship and the furnishings?

JM: Oh, it was I think—I believe the second-largest ocean luxury liner in existence. It was by that time extremely well run, of course. We did manage to enjoy that trip and have always looked back on it with pleasure.

LC: I'm sure. It was probably fabulous. Now the purser who thought that perhaps you were to be traveling down below decks, what assumption was he making there? Just from someone—

JM: Oh, he just looked at all the junk that my wife had with her, including things trailing out of this basket she was carrying. He thought, she certainly is steerage headed and that's where he directed us.

LC: Did you see the people who were traveling steerage at all as they were boarding?

JM: Oh, I can't really recall, Laura. I think maybe we could see them from one deck to another deck below, but that may have been another ship crossing. I can't remember for sure.

LC: I just wonder if there were included for example DPs (displaced person) and people like that who even at this late date were still leaving Europe?

JM: There could have been. I can't say because I don't recall that we had any particular contact with people in steerage. This trip was a very great contrast to the one which we had in 1946, which I've already described to you.

LC: Yes.

JM: It was single class from top to bottom.

LC: Did you meet any interesting characters on this journey, or were you—

JM: I don't recall any particular ones, Laura, on this particular voyage.

LC: You were going down—your ultimate goal, I suppose, was to go back to Washington?

JM: Yes, because after the two-and-a-half years in Turkey, we were authorized several weeks of home leave. Then we went to Washington, where my wife's family, my father-in-law, who had been a lawyer in New York before the war and had been a Naval officer during the war, and had stayed on as a Naval officer for a couple of years in order to help translate captured German documents for the Navy department. In 1947, was employed by the CIA as the head of a special intelligence unit dealing with the UN

(United Nations) and American officials concerned with that. So he and his wife had moved from New York to Washington, had taken an apartment in what was then the old Wardman Park Hotel. It still exists. I don't know whether it's called the Sheraton Park or what. It's gone through so many changes in management in intervening years, but it was a hotel set in a nice woodland park right on Connecticut Avenue, I suppose about, oh, a couple of miles from the White House. They had this apartment and had rented an additional room for us to take adjoining their apartment, opening right into their apartment. So that's where we stayed during our time in Washington in 1949. Shortly after I got to Washington, I was told that I was being assigned to a one month's training course at the Department of Commerce. So I went through that course. I had done work of interest to that department in Istanbul.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: I went through that course. I do remember a brief encounter with Henry Wallace.

LC: Oh. Okay.

JM: Who had been Roosevelt's vice president during his third term and had—but was not chosen by Roosevelt to be his vice presidential candidate in his fourth term. Harry Truman was, fortunately. Wallace had become Secretary of Commerce. I was in a classroom session one morning during this Department of Commerce training course when the door opened and in walked the Secretary of Commerce, Henry Wallace. "Oh, I hoped this was a business meeting I was supposed to attend." He seemed to be a real bumbler. Well, I never had much respect for Wallace anyway. This caused it to decline still more. Then, of course, in 1948, he ran as a radical candidate, third party candidate against both Truman and Dewey and was substantially defeated.

LC: Radical meaning on the left?

JM: Yeah, exactly, very much so on the left.

LC: I suppose that's probably partly why he wasn't an object of your political affection then, anyway.

JM: No. Oh, no. At that time, Laura, not for Wallace. I was very much a Democrat at that time. I think I've already explained this in our extensive debriefings of how I changed parties in the 1960s.

LC: Yes.

JM: No. Then I was very much a Democrat.

LC: But he was quite a—

JM: But not of the leftist variety.

LC: Yes. He was really the hard left of the New Deal.

JM: I was liberal, but not leftist.

LC: Right. Right. Wallace really, really was pretty far left.

JM: As he turned out to be in ’48, because he wanted to deal very softly with the Soviet Union, which was then increasingly our adversary.

LC: Yes. Exactly. Joe, I wonder if I can ask you for a moment about your father-in-law’s work. Can you say anything more about what he was doing for example?

JM: Well, he—I think this unit would do what it could to collect intelligence on officials in the UN. Background and so forth for use by our people working on UN affairs in their dealings and assessments.

LC: So different kinds of profiles and that sort of thing perhaps?

JM: That’s right. His unit was transferred. It was a small unit, I think, of only two or three people. It was transferred bodily to the State Department, gee, I guess by 1949 or 1950. Then in 1953, when the Republicans took over the administration, Eisenhower became president and John Foster Dulles became the secretary of state and began a substantial program of reduction of personnel within the State Department and the Foreign Service, quite rightly in my view. As I’ll tell you later, we were greatly overstaffed in the embassy there in Switzerland, where I was stationed at that point. Dulles cut out completely my father-in-law’s unit. He was RIF’ed (reduction in force) from the government and decided to retire and never had any affection for John Foster Dulles after that time.

LC: I can well believe that. I can well believe that.

JM: Because he left the government in ’53 completely. A bit bitter, I might say.

LC: Well, in—at the point that you were in Washington in the middle of 1949, to what extent were you aware of the beginnings of mumblings about State Department personnel and there being left-wing people in the State Department who were not—

JM: Laura, I don't recall. Let's see, I don't know whether the Hiss trial had already begun there or not.

LC: I think it might have been just a bit later on.

JM: Yeah, I think so. I know McCarthy's big offensive, I think, was actually launched early in 1950, as I remember. The Hiss thing may have already come up, but I'm not sure.

LC: There were some rumblings for example about the Institute of Pacific Affairs and—

JM: Yeah. I don't think at that point that too much had come up because it was quite recent that the communists had taken over China, which I think was one of the key elements that motivated this communist agent fear in Washington.

LC: Right. Okay. You were in Washington for just a couple of months or a month?

JM: Well, I'll tell you. I was actually there for longer than anticipated because when I left Istanbul, I had orders to go to Jakarta in Indonesia. I guess it was then still called Batavia, but Indonesia had either just acquired or was on the point of acquiring its independence.

LC: That's right.

JM: We were supposed to go there. But the man who had been the head of, the economic counselor in Ankara, Edward Lawson, was then back in Washington and had just been assigned as our—well, he was assigned as minister to Iceland. We had a legation instead of an embassy then. It was later raised to embassy status while he was there and he became ambassador. He was assigned to Iceland and he asked me whether I would like to go to Iceland and run the Marshall Plan for him, because he was concurrently the head of the very small Marshall Plan mission. I said, "Yes," because I had some contact with him in Turkey. I liked and respected him and was a little bit glad with one child to avoid an assignment to the tropics, which I had no experience in.

LC: Yes.

JM: But the State Department told him, "Okay. You can have Mendenhall if you find a replacement for him to go to Indonesia."

LC: Oh, no kidding. Do you know how he was able to execute that?

JM: Well, it took him many weeks. So we during these weeks in Washington—actually, I had a month at the Department of Commerce in Washington, then two weeks at the Department of Commerce field office in Chicago. So I had six weeks of training during this period.

LC: Okay.

JM: But then some weeks of vacation. We didn't know whether to buy winter clothing to go to Iceland or tropical clothing to go to Indonesia until—let's see. We arrived in Washington in early June. We didn't know until early September that Lawson had finally been successful in finding a replacement for me in Indonesia and that I was going to go to Iceland with him. So my wife rushed out to start to buy things for going to Iceland.

LC: Right. Was—were you quite pleased with the way that had worked out?

JM: Yes, actually. Since I knew Lawson, he knew me, and the—as I shall tell you subsequently, the Marshall Plan job in Iceland proved to be a very challenging one.

LC: Yes, I'm sure.

JM: I've always been delighted that it turned out that way. We were pleased at the time.

LC: Well, perhaps in the next session, sir, we'll talk about Iceland in some detail. I'm looking forward to it.

JM: Sorry, Laura, that I relapsed into so many personal things that took the whole hour.

LC: It's wonderful. It's absolutely wonderful. We'll take a break here.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [6] of [57]
Date: July 16, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the sixteenth of July 2004. I am, as usual, on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. I am speaking to the ambassador by telephone. He is in Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: We had left off our last session with talking about your summer spent in Washington at the Commerce Department. There was some suggestion that you might receive as your next posting and appointment in Jakarta, but that had not come through. Instead you found out that you were going to go to Iceland. Can you tell me how that came about?

JM: Yes. Actually the man who was appointed as our minister to Iceland—at that point, we did not have an ambassador that had the—the mission there had legation status rather than embassy—had known me in Turkey. He was the economic counselor in Ankara when I was in the economic and commercial section in Istanbul. I guess he must have been sufficiently impressed with my work there that he asked me to go to Iceland to run the Marshall Plan for him because he was concurrently head of the Marshall Plan mission in Iceland. Aside from him, there was only one full-time officer in the mission. He asked me to take on that job and I agreed to, but I think as I indicated last time, the State Department told him he would have to find a replacement for me to go to Indonesia.

LC: Yes.

JM: He evidently finally did because by September of ’49, he said that everything was clear now for me to go to Iceland. He left, I think, two or three weeks before I did to go. We left in October in 1949 to proceed by air from New York to Reykjavik, which was not—well, actually, New York to Keflavik. Keflavik was originally a military airbase, oh, I guess about thirty miles from Reykjavik, an American military air base during World War II. That’s where commercial flights landed as well.

So we actually landed at Keflavik. I think we took, I believe it was the old American Airlines then. I suppose it was the predecessor to the present American. It was actually my wife's first flight. She was scared to death of flying.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Looked terror-stricken for the—there was a propeller plane, of course, and I think it took about fourteen hours to fly from New York to Reykjavik. I believe I mentioned the last time that she did look out the window and see the Aurora Borealis, which was the first time we'd ever seen that.

LC: Yes.

JM: Then we did land in Keflavik. We were picked up and taken into Reykjavik. I'd like to start, Laura, on Iceland by giving a brief description of the country at that stage.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: Because it's one that I don't think is very well known to Americans. It was then a country of about two hundred thousand people. Probably one of the most politicized in the world. With that small number of people, everybody in the country was a politician. People tended to know everybody else. When that happens, politics can become a pretty bitter preoccupation of the people. It certainly was in Iceland at that stage. There were four main political parties. Actually the communists were quite strong in the party. They had forced the government a few months previous to our arrival to remove—informed the United States it had to remove its forces from the airbase at Keflavik. Iceland did, however, join the new NATO organization, which as you recall was organized in early 1949.

LC: Yes, sir.

JM: Later American troops were reintroduced. We succeeded in negotiating an agreement with Iceland that permitted their reentry there. As far as I know, I think we still have some forces in Keflavik. This is, what, now fifty-five years later, I think. Actually, we are still in contact with some friends in Iceland.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Yes. One wrote to us a few months ago saying that the Icelanders were upset that the U.S. might remove those few final forces from Keflavik. Quite a change to

the difficulty of reintroducing them in, I think it was ’50 or ’51. Interesting how things like that do change. But I think the communists, obviously the communists are not as strong or certainly not regarded as hostile to us as they used to be, anyway. So things do change. In addition to the communists, there was the Conservative Party, which was the chief rival of the communists, Progressive Party, which was essentially one of the farmers, and a Socialist Party. Those were the four, which contended for power in the country constantly and I believe still do, as a matter of fact. I don’t think there’s been that much of a change in the political configuration of the country. At the time we arrived, one of the most important political figures, the head of the Conservative Party, was an extremely colorful old fellow by the name of Olafur Thors. Actually, his brother was the Icelandic ambassador in Washington, so his family was very prominent in Iceland. I found him extremely fascinating because he always dressed in a high collar, the style that was used quite extensive, you know, in the nineteenth century here in America. He still in the mid-twentieth century wore that kind of style of shirt always. He was a very viable and good orator. He was the one from whom I first learned about the Balearic Islands off in the Mediterranean off the east coast of Spain because he went down there on a vacation in Majorca and came back talking about them. So I had to go home and look them up on the atlas and see where they were. But I learned quite a number of things. I always enjoyed talking to him when I ran into him at parties. He was prime minister part of the time I was there, actually, a good deal of the time. Because of the division among the parties, they agreed on a figurehead prime minister. The strong people held other cabinet posts, an interesting political compromise.

LC: Very. Now was Olafur Thors the figurehead or was he much more effective?

JM: No. No. He would never have been the—he was the very strong leader of the Conservative Party. The figurehead was a man from the Progressive or Farmer’s Party, but not either of the two leaders of that party. One of the leaders was the minister of agriculture, a former boxer. I might even say at this stage, I had a big run-in with him at one point during my two year, two month’s assignment there. I thought he might get up and floor me right in his office, as a matter of fact. This was—at a certain stage during my assignment there, the Marshall Plan was inviting young farmers from Europe

to come on technical assistance. This is the stage to see what they could learn about farming and increased production.

LC: Sure.

JM: Of course, increase national output in Europe at that time, when there was so many serious economic and financial problems on the part of those countries. We proposed or suggested the Icelandic government, they might like to send a group of young farmers to the U.S. We did indicate that they had to be able to speak English because there would be no point in their going to American farms if they couldn't speak English and exchange some views with them. So the government proposed, I think a group of ten or twelve young men in their early twenties to go to the States for, I think, something like a couple of months, as I recall. I interviewed each of these young men in my office to make sure he had fluency in English. One of them clearly did not, but he happened to be the son of one of the principle supporters of the minister of agriculture. So my colleague in the Icelandic government, whose office I was in almost every day for two years, called me and said, "The minister of agriculture wants to see you because you've turned down this son of one of his principle supporters." So my Icelandic colleague and I went over to his office and boy, as I say, he was so threatening. Finally he brought his fist down very hard on the desk and said, "If this fellow doesn't go, nobody will go!" So I went back and reported rather tremulously to Mr. Lawson, our minister. He just looked at me and he said, "Are you right?" I said, "Yes. I interviewed this guy and I know I'm right." He said, "If you're right, I'll back you up." Interestingly enough, the minister of agriculture backed down. All the young farmers went except this particular one. Whenever I saw him subsequently at any cocktail party, he was just as cordial as he could be.

LC: Isn't that funny?

JM: Yes.

LC: Well, he made a fine effort to enforce his way.

JM: Oh, he did. The other principle leader of the Progressive Party was the minister of finance, whom I had always had very easy dealings. But since the two of them were the powers in that party and neither would permit the other to become the prime minister, they picked the figurehead to be the prime minister.

LC: Now, who was this finance minister?

JM: His name, as I recall, was Emil Jonsson, J-O-N-S-S-O-N. Interesting, Laura, in Iceland, there are virtually no surnames. The surname is always simply the son of the father or the daughter of the father. That's still true. The only prominent Icelander I can remember who had a last name was this colorful figure who was the head of the Conservative Party, Olafur Thors. Thors was a Danish name rather than an Icelandic name by origin. Therefore that was always reserved as a family name. For example, the man in the Icelandic government who was my colleague in the Ministry of Commerce, his name was Thorhallur Asgeirsson. His father, who subsequently became president while I was there, was Asgeir Asgeirsson. You can see the—that had been the name of the father and the grandfather. Then when my friend had sons, the family name of his sons was Thorhallson, not Asgeirsson. The same way with respect to daughter, the daughters always took the name, let's say Asgeirsdóttir was the name of the daughter. So it was awfully hard in dealing with Icelanders unless you knew intimately who was related to whom to be sure that you weren't talking about somebody who was a member of the family. You had to be sort of super careful in that respect.

LC: So this called up all one's diplomatic qualities, as it were.

JM: Yes, particularly memory in this case, memory and some knowledge. I also wanted to discuss for a moment the economic and financial situation of Iceland when I arrived.

LC: Yes. Yes, please.

JM: Iceland had come out of World War II with seventy-five million dollars in foreign exchange reserves, which for a country of two hundred thousand at that time, when prices were much lower than today, was an extremely substantial amount of money. They had earned this money first from British troops and then subsequently American troops who were stationed in Iceland during World War II, because Iceland's exports were not very great. They consisted of over ninety-five percent of fish products. Therefore at the end of World War II were in a very favorable financial situation. But they went on a big spending spree and in two years had spent the whole seventy-five million dollars. I remember, for example, one of the first Icelandic homes into which we went was one of the officials of the Reykjavik Municipal Electric Company. I never—

this was in late ’49, early ’50—never seen so many electrical appliances in my life, obviously all of them imported. This was just one indication of how they had spent that whole seventy-five million dollars. When we arrived in 1949, the country was broke as far as foreign exchange was concerned. They got fruit—those families, all the families in the country got fruit once a year when they bartered a shipload of fish with Israel for oranges. Otherwise, there was no fruit. They lived almost completely on fish and some lamb, which was raised locally, and potatoes. The hotel at which we stayed until we found a house, every meal was fish and boiled potatoes. Actually, there was only one hotel in Reykjavik at that time. We stayed at the Hotel Borg, which actually still exists. I remember, I at that point was not particularly fond of fish. I hate—I like potatoes, but I hate boiled potatoes. So fortunately, we had to stay only two weeks at that hotel.

LC: I was going to say.

JM: I wouldn’t have wanted to stay longer. We did have, at the legation—maybe I mentioned this the last time. It seems to me I might have. Maybe I have been talking to some other people about it. But anyway, at the legation, we had a small commissary, which was open one day a week, I think, for about an hour with some products we managed to get from the airbase at Keflavik. Its offerings were extremely limited. The only beef offering was called roasting and frying beef, which was called R&F familiarly by everybody. So it was a single cut of meat, which you could roast, or fry, and very little variation. We could get ham there, but we got very little. So we ate a lot of fish as well, ourselves, from the local market. Before I get into what I did there, I do want to say that my wife and I went back in 1994 for three days. I have never seen such a transformation in any country in my life. By 1994 this country, which was so poor when we were there, had one car for every two Icelanders, many very modern and good hotels. The hotel at which we stayed for those three days was absolutely splendid. Excellent restaurants. We went to a restaurant, very fine restaurant in an old Icelandic corrugated tin house, which had an excellent meal including a tropical fruit I had never heard of from Malaysia for dessert. So you can see what kind of transformation that country had gone through in the fifty years, or forty-five years at that point, from the time we had been there. Very fascinating as to how it can change.

LC: Amazing. Absolutely amazing. Joe, what took you there in 1994?

JM: We went back to visit the Icelandic friends with whom we had maintained contact.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Yeah. Two couples with whom we are still—actually, one of the husbands has since died and the other unfortunately is completely gone with Alzheimer's. But we are in still contact with both wives. So we have kept up these Icelandic friendships. I might intersperse one very personal item at this point in connection with one of those families.

LC: Yes.

JM: One of the two families consisted of the Icelandic colleague in whose office I was virtually in every day, and his Norwegian-American wife. We were very, very friendly with them. The other was our next-door neighbor, who was an Icelandic surgeon. It was he who looked after my wife when she became pregnant with our second child while we were in Iceland. Unfortunately, the child proved at the end of nine months to be stillborn. It was the only son we would have ever had. We do have three daughters now, but that was the only son. But we remained great friends and the child was buried in the cemetery lot of this doctor and his family. So we still have that extremely personal tie with them.

LC: Yes.

JM: Incidentally, the delivery was not by the doctor. All deliveries were then by midwives in Iceland.

LC: I was going to ask about the care.

JM: The care was very good. We never felt any fault at all as far as the Icelandic medical care was concerned. It was just one of those things that happened.

LC: That's a very, very difficult thing.

JM: Yeah.

LC: Yes. I'm sure it was—

JM: But this came up because you asked me why we went back. We went back to visit. We had a wonderful time for the three days with these two sets of families.

LC: Well, it's quite remarkable the change that you observed over that period. Quite remarkable. Yes.

JM: Oh, it is. I think one of the greatest in the world of any country. I think I did mention earlier, Egypt, which hasn't made nearly as much progress, we did observe one tremendous change which I think I may have mentioned. We went through there in '46 on the way to Turkey.

LC: Yes.

JM: I think I indicated that it looked as those ninety percent of the kids suffered from trachoma, that terrible disease of the eyes with the pus flowing out and flies crawling on them. When we went back in '83 with an Italian tour group, we observed none of this. So in that sense—some of the countries, which haven't advanced to the degree one might have hoped, have also made some tremendous strides as well.

LC: Right. It all has to do with population levels and investments in whatever the country has made its top priorities.

JM: Yeah. I think probably a good deal of foreign assistance in the case of Israel or case of Egypt.

LC: Egypt. Uh-huh.

JM: It also depends on the priorities of the government policies and the priorities with which they assign for their expenditures, government expenditures.

LC: Well, Joe, let me ask you a couple of, these would be sort of timeline questions that will help the listener appreciate the time in which you arrived in Iceland and began your work there. At the end of 1949, in October in fact, the Chinese revolution had come to its end and the People's Republic of China was founded. That had some impact, I think, on the Foreign Service generally. Did it have any impact on you particularly?

JM: You mean because of the anti-communist drive on the part particularly of Senator McCarthy?

LC: Correct.

JM: No. It never had any specific impact on me and that really didn't—it began to emerge during the period we were in Iceland, but it came to a head after we had left Iceland and were—our next post was in Switzerland. That's when it really came to a head. We were extremely disturbed about it, but it never directly affected us personally.

LC: Did you have—I gather that this was primarily a sort of Washington phenomenon. Since you weren't there, you were sort of seeing it at a remove, of course.

JM: Well, you say primarily a Washington phenomenon, and in a sense, yes. Although it affected quite a certain number of Foreign Service officers, some of whom were abroad at the time when it started and then who were summoned back to Washington. Some were ousted from the Service as a result of it.

LC: Anyone that you had known during your time briefly as a China hand?

JM: No, because I—no, because I had—during that brief period of a few months in 1946 when I worked as an analyst on China for the predecessor of CIA, I didn't really have contact with any Foreign Service officers at that stage. So I didn't really know any China hands at that time.

LC: So it was something that you were aware of, just as you were aware of other major trends in America.

JM: Right. During the earlier years in Switzerland, we were extremely aware of it because it was a major issue both in the United States and as far as foreign sentiment was concerned. You wanted to ask another question?

LC: Yes, just another one that sort of again sort of sets the timeline. In the spring of 1950, the Korean conflict began. Then as the course of that year went on the commitment of, a decision to commit American troops. Did that have any impact on the business that you were conducting with the Marshall Plan?

JM: In a sense. I can recount an interesting experience in that respect. The Korean War actually—the North Korean invasion of the South occurred on a Sunday. On that particular Sunday, my wife and I were out in the wild interior of Iceland with my Icelandic colleague from the Ministry of Commerce and his wife, visiting the original—what we call geyser, what the Icelanders call geyser—which didn't go off the way Old Faithful does in Yellowstone, spontaneously every, oh, I guess, twenty or thirty minutes. This one had to have a lot of soap dumped into it to make it produce. I remember we watched the soap being poured in and waited for it to produce. It did. Then we had lunch at a little restaurant right by there. While we were eating lunch, the news came over the Icelandic radio about the North Korean invasion of the South. So that's where we were when we got the first news of the Korean War.

LC: Very interesting.

JM: The following week, I was slated to go to Paris for a meeting of all the Marshall Plan missions in Europe with the European headquarters of the Marshall Plan. I might indicate briefly the structure of the Economic Cooperation Administration, which was the U.S. agency then administering the Marshall Plan. It obviously had its headquarters in Washington, but it also had a sub headquarters in Paris, which was then headed by Averell Harriman, who had been appointed as the head of it in 1948 and still in mid-1950—this is June of '50 we're talking about—was still there. I think that European headquarters had summoned a meeting of all the Marshall Plan mission chiefs from the various recipient countries in Europe. Our minister decided that he didn't want to go down to the Continent. So he asked me to go in his stead. Now it was extremely interesting to me to watch Harriman. Harriman was actually slated to leave very shortly. A fellow by the name of Milton Katz, who was a professor in the law school at Harvard and was the number two under Harriman, was shortly slated to take over. To watch these two at this meeting of mission chiefs, which had been summoned in order to discuss various Marshall Plan activities and proposals, the mission chiefs didn't deal with this at all. All we heard during this whole session from these two individuals was their extreme concern over the communist invasion of South Korea and whether this presaged a sweep by the Soviets against Western Europe. Very interesting how perturbed they were at that stage. Of course, the Korean—or the invasion by North Korea backed as we now know by the Soviets and by the communist Chinese did produce a tremendous change in American military policy, because prior to that time we had been cutting the military budget. There was an extreme reversal in policy by the Democratic president, Mr. Truman, to build up our military and to initiate military assistance programs to our allies in Europe and Asia. So it was fascinating to me to observe how these two prominent figures, Averell Harriman and Milton Katz reacted to this. I think it was quite typical of the reaction in Washington at that stage as well.

LC: Interesting that the perception was that the invasion in Korea was in fact some kind of precursor. It wasn't the—it was a sideshow. It wasn't the main event.

JM: There was extreme concern in that respect, obviously in Washington as well as in the Marshall Plan headquarters in Paris.

LC: Very interesting.

JM: I think that was true in America generally in the earlier stages. Because it was just the year previously, as I recall, that the Soviets had acquired the nuclear bomb.

LC: That is also correct. Yes, sir. Of course, that changed the strategic relationship between us.

JM: The equation, right.

LC: Tell me a little bit, Joe, about your duties as [Marshall] Plan manager?

JM: Well, as the only full-time officer in the mission until I had been there about a year or year-and-a-half when the controller's office in Paris insisted that it assign a controller to the mission in Iceland. I said I didn't think it was necessary there because the Icelanders were as honest as the day is long. So I didn't think we had to engage in the kind of financial checks by a controller, which were required in a lot of other Marshall Plan recipient countries. But the insistence was so great I finally had to agree. Well, the Marshall Plan sent me a guy who was totally ineffectual in this respect. He was not only the controller, but the main thing he could do was handle the administrative functions of our very small Marshall Plan mission in Iceland, very limited. The main thing he did for me was to arrange my travel when I had to. So he added very little to that mission. Now, getting into the substantive aspects of the work. When I arrived, the main part of our program was to finance imports into Iceland, because I indicated there, they were totally out of foreign exchange.

LC: Right.

JM: It was imports from the United States to try to maintain a minimum level of the standard of living in Iceland. There was also beginning of discussion of Marshall Plan financing of certain projects in the country, which took off after I arrived there. We financed a hydroelectric plant for Reykjavik. Reykjavik had—there was already one, but it was no longer sufficient to furnish all the power required. So we financed that project, which was finished by 1953. Incidentally, I read in the press last year that there was a big fiftieth anniversary celebration of that project.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Yes. We also financed a smaller hydroelectric plant in Northern Iceland. So I have a lot of contacts with the municipal electric officials in Reykjavik, as well as with

the officials in the government who dealt with this small plant in Northern Iceland. Neither of these projects presented any difficulties. The third project however, the Icelanders wanted the Marshall Plan to finance a fertilizer plant so as to try to increase agricultural production in the country. Well, every proposal for an industrial project went through a very extensive review process in both Paris and then in Washington. It was very hard to get any project through the—if there were any pros, if there were any cons about it, they were all pros, but if there were any cons, very difficult to get a project through this bureaucratic process. There were certainly some cons with respect to the fertilizer project because to be at all economical, it had to produce enough to allow for some exports. The question was whether there was any market for those exports and whether it was going to be economical or not depended among other things upon the price of the power which this project was going to use. That also went back to the first project, the hydro project. Well, there was a lot of opposition in both Paris and Washington to this project. I decided to support it vigorously. It was pushed on the part of the Icelandic government by one of the most interesting and powerful people in that country. I had mentioned the leader of the Conservative Party who was so colorful. This was another colorful Icelandic character. He was the head of the Icelandic Cooperative Association, which was very extensive throughout the country, quite powerful, and also a member of the Progressive Party. Well, he had convinced the government, the Icelandic government to push this with all its might. It did and I agreed. We finally got that project approved and initiated, got the construction started while I was there. I'll give you another little interesting tidbit. I left Iceland in December of '51 and was assigned to the embassy in Bern, Switzerland. I guess it was during the course of the second year I was there, I got a telegram from Iceland from this very colorful man who was the head of the cooperatives and pushing this fertilizer plant, which he was going to head that organization as well, inviting me to come to Iceland for the inauguration of the fertilizer plant and offering to pay my air passage from Switzerland to Iceland for it. Well, I immediately got very concerned that somebody might consider that payment by another government for my air passage would amount to a conflict of interest since I had pushed this. So I felt I had to decline this invitation. Incidentally, about, oh, I guess, fifteen or more years after that, I happened to run into this gentleman in a restaurant in Georgetown

in Washington with his wife. I was then living in—stationed in Laos. I was back and one of our daughters we had left behind in school in the U.S., I had taken her to the same restaurant and I happened to spy this gentleman across the restaurant, recognized him immediately, and he looked at me and recognized me. So we had a brief get-together about fifteen years later in a restaurant in Georgetown.

LC: What was this gentleman's name? Do you remember?

JM: Yes. Vilhjalmur Thor. Vilhjalmur Thor. His name was T-H-O-R, pronounced Thor, but the colorful conservative prime minister was Olafur Thors, T-H-O-R-S, where the H was not pronounced in his because it was of Danish origin, but it was in Vilhjalmur Thor. Little things that one again has to remember.

LC: Exactly. That's quite amazing that you just came across him in a restaurant.

JM: It is.

LC: That's wonderful.

JM: Now, two of the activities in which the mission was engaged while I was there, one financing the import program from the United States and second backing the three projects, which I have discussed. The third thing that we did was to initiate technical assistance to Iceland. That also was a European-wide idea of the Marshall Plan. All the other countries, recipient countries had initiated technical assistance, but it was financed by the U.S. We started one in Iceland right after I arrived. The first technical assistance project was to send a fish man, fish expert, out from Boston to advise the Icelandic fish industry on how to increase its exports to the United States. Interestingly, that ran into a certain amount of flak because the Icelanders thought they were just as expert as this guy and didn't really like having him there. Although it had been pushed—this project had been pushed by the Icelandic government as well. But there was one concrete recommendation he made, which did help the industry. At that point, the most—all Icelandic fish exported to the States was frozen. Into Europe, not only already frozen, but they shipped some under ice. Do you know what the difference is?

LC: No. No I don't.

JM: Well, it was fresh fish under ice, and frozen it was already cut up and frozen in packages. The fresh fish wasn't frozen, but under ice. But the U.S. was too far away to do that, so it was all frozen. He told the Icelandic industry, "Well, you're sending the

frozen fish filets to the U.S. skinned. Americans eat skin on their fish. So you'll make money by leaving the skin on and you'll earn more U.S. dollar foreign exchange if you do it that way." Well, that was the one concrete thing that came out of that mission. Then we had several other technical assistance projects. I've already mentioned the young farmers' one. I won't go into the details on the others, but that was the third program activity in which we became engaged while I was there. Then there was a fourth. I guess it was by early 1951, the Marshall Plan European headquarters was pushing for the formation of a European payments union in order to increase trade among the European countries themselves. In order to get this trade moving vigorously, the U.S. would provide a certain amount of assistance to each European country for imports from other European countries. So up to that time, all the imports financed from the Marshall Plan came from the U.S.

LC: Yes.

JM: So this—I was very concerned when this proposal came up as far as Iceland was concerned, that the Icelanders in view of what they had done with that seventy-five million dollars coming out of World War II, would simply spend it for luxury products. It wouldn't contribute anything to the economy. So I was not enthusiastic at all about this at first. Our minister, however, was then in the process of negotiation with the Icelandic government about the readmission of American troops to Iceland. So for political reasons, he wanted it to go through. So he and I were head-to-head on this for a little while, but I finally had to succumb. This became a fourth program, a fourth major program activity of the mission. Those were the four principle things in which the Marshall Plan mission engaged.

LC: Now, Joe, let me ask you a couple of clarifying questions. The minister—was it Minister Lawson throughout your time there?

JM: Yes, right. Actually, he was in Iceland for five years. While he was there, the legation was subsequently raised to the status of embassy, and he became ambassador. After five years in Iceland, he went to Israel for five years as ambassador. So those were his ambassadorial posts.

LC: Now what was his background within the department?

JM: Well, he had originally been a Department of Commerce commercial attaché abroad. In 1939, the Department of Commerce, Foreign Commerce Service, was integrated into the State Department and became part of our Foreign Service. So he integrated at that point. He had always been in the economic field. As I indicated, I became acquainted with him. Excuse me, Laura. I'm talking so much I'm losing my voice. He became acquainted—I became acquainted with him when he was the head of the economic section in Ankara as economic consular. He was there until, oh, I think 1948, when he was—no really '49, I think, when he was nominated as minister to Iceland. Excuse me, I'm going to take a drink of water, Laura.

LC: Sure, sure. Go ahead, sir. Is there anything more you can tell us about Ambassador Lawson?

JM: Well, I may mention a few other things, aspects of living in Iceland.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: It was very pleasant in the summer. Iceland should have been named Greenland, and Greenland, Iceland, because Greenland is always covered with ice and snow, whereas Iceland gets quite a fair amount in the winter but in summer there is a relatively nice period. The temperature rarely gets above sixty, but because of its far northern location, the sun can be shining for about twenty-two hours of the day. I can remember mowing my lawn, my little lawn around my house with my push lawnmower at 11:30 at night because it was still daylight. I even had a little vegetable patch with potatoes. We had maybe carrots. We had currant bushes on this little house we were renting. We also planted some flowers, among other things, pansy plants. Pansy plants in that cool climate were the finest I have ever seen in the world. I've counted fifty to sixty blooms on a single pansy plant. I defy any American to equal that record.

LC: That's incredible.

JM: Isn't it?

LC: Yes.

JM: Because the climate was never very warm, because pansies don't like it very warm, as you know.

LC: That's right. Absolutely.

JM: The little house that we got after a couple of weeks was sort of unique. There were ours and the one occupied by our doctor-surgeon neighbor were houses that had been constructed by a Danish architect in rather modern style. Our living room had a slanted window, and inside that window there was a flower planter box filled with tropical plants, hibiscus, passionflower plants, I think the orange trees. All kinds of remarkable things because they even in winter got sufficient light to be sustained.

LC: So this was an early solar energy use?

JM: Exactly.

LC: That's wonderful.

JM: The house was heated, heated by—most Icelandic houses were heated by the natural hot water, because a lot of Iceland is very volcanic. There's lots of steam under the earth and hot water. So most houses were heated that way. Ours however was heated by electricity with very thin little radiators enclosed in steel on the wall about oh, a quarter-of-an-inch thick. A very efficient and effective way of heating, and since electricity was not too high in price since it was all hydro, we were able to heat the house that way very effectively. We loved that little house. Well, it had mainly a living room, a very tiny dining room. Actually, it was sort of an entry hall dining room opening into the living room on one side, and a tiny, tiny study on the other side and two little bedrooms. At that point, we had just the one child. So my wife and I had the one bedroom and our little daughter that had been born in Turkey had the other bedroom. We always loved that little house while we were there. I might interject at this point, that whereas the summers were relatively pleasant, the winters were long and dark. One paid for that long daylight in the summer by about three hours of sunlight in the winter in December. I finally got a car after I had been in Iceland about a year. I refused to buy a car until I had enough to pay for it outright. So I finally got one after we had been in Iceland about a year. Before that, I had taken the bus to the office all the time from our—we were in one of the little suburbs. I think it was about ten minutes into town. So I took the bus back and forth all the time, waiting for it in the cold and winter. We finally got this car. We had it during the second winter we were there. I had great problems in two respects because with the small amount of sunlight, one had to use the headlights

virtually all the time. My battery was constantly going down because of the use of the headlights.

LC: Oh, yes. I hadn't thought of that.

JM: The second thing, since we lived off one of the main roads, one had to go down a hill into a hollow and up another hill to get to our place, it snowed so much the main roads would get clear. Then I'd have to put the chains on for the last half-a-mile down this hill and up the other one. The chains for this car were absolutely almost impossible to get on. They were the toughest chains I ever tried. It used to take me a half hour to get the blasted chains on in that cold, bitter weather outside.

LC: Terrible.

JM: Since we had no garage, the car was outside all the time and therefore subject to all the icing that came along.

LC: Oh, just getting it prepped to drive in the morning must have been something.

JM: Let me tell you another little anecdote with respect to that car. As I indicated, I had to park it on the street. I began to notice as I got into the car in the morning, that the little—the car was constructed so that for the front doors, there was a window but also a little—what do we call these things that you use to open? You know, it wasn't a solid window, but there were two parts to it. A little—oh, I can't think of the word they use that you just unhooked from inside and pushed open so you didn't have to put the window down.

LC: Yes. Many Europeans just push the window out, and it has a latch.

JM: Well, that was an American car, too. It was a Chevrolet. So we had—

LC: Oh, interesting.

JM: That's what we had then. I began to notice that this thing looked as though it was open or had been tampered with. About the third or fourth night after this, my wife and I were sleeping in our bedroom, which was near the street where the car was parked. We heard a noise outside. I looked outside, and I saw a guy trying to get into my car. He had succeeded, I think, in getting that window open and somehow I think had gotten the door open. I telephoned my next-door doctor neighbor, got him out of bed—you still hear me, Laura?

LC: Yes, absolutely.

JM: Got him out of bed, and he said, "Well, get into mine." Because by the time this had all gone through and the light's on in the car, this guy had disappeared, of course, the guy trying to get into the car.

LC: Sure.

JM: He said, "Get into my car, and we'll drive down the street." We drove down our suburban street. I suppose about eight or ten houses down—this must have been about 1:00 or 2:00AM, we saw a house with the lights on. We saw a guy peeking out the window.

LC: Oh, no.

JM: We pretty soon concluded that this was the guy who had been trying to get into my car because he kept peeking surreptitiously, you know, around the corner of the window to see what was happening in the street. So I reported this to the police the next morning. They arrested the guy, and he confessed. But I don't think—the Icelanders virtually had—I don't think they had any prisons there because there was no crime in the country to speak of. There was no reason for this guy to steal the car because Iceland is a remote island and you can't do very much with it. All he wanted was a joyride in the car. So I don't think the police did much to him. But this never recurred in that country.

LC: (Laughs) That's funny. That's very funny. Joe, let me ask you a little bit about the other members of the diplomatic community. First of all, how big was the American mission?

JM: The legation?

LC: I'm sorry, the legation.

JM: It had the minister, a number two, a political officer, an economic officer, and an administrative officer, and some secretaries. Actually, I think we even had an American chauffeur provided by the State Department for the minister, as well as civilian American guards for the mission. Because it was virtually impossible to find people in Iceland to occupy those positions as chauffeurs or guards, because the employment was so full in the country, even though they had virtually no money.

LC: Right.

JM: We couldn't come up with Icelanders for those jobs.

LC: Okay. So Americans—

JM: We did have some Icelandic employees as receptionists, for example, because one of our—or two of our officers married Icelandic girls who had been receptionists.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Yes.

LC: So the legation's personnel, personnel compliment was not large.

JM: No. It was not large. The legation was located in what had been an old three-story apartment building. No, I guess, a two-story apartment building, I think. So it was not fancy at all. It was most unprepossessing as an American mission abroad. We did acquire a piece of land on which to build an American diplomatic mission down by the little lake in the central part of Reykjavik. But my understanding is we never built on it. I think even in 1994, I don't know whether we still owned it or not, but it still hadn't been built upon. So I don't know what the reason for that was over the years. I don't even know whether when I was back in 1994, whether the American mission was still in the same building or not, because I don't think I ever went near it.

LC: You had other fish to fry, as it were.

JM: Yeah, like I said, we were with our Icelandic friends.

LC: Right. Joe, what about other diplomats from other countries?

JM: Well, there were not many. Oh, this is another little anecdote. There was a British legation there headed by a bachelor who had previously been the British minister in Panama. While we were there, a conflict over cod broke out between Britain and Iceland. We called it the Cod War. It wasn't really a war, but that's what it was referred to.

LC: Right. Right.

JM: The British minister was so vigorous and vociferous in support of the Icelandic position on this issue that he was recalled to London and reduced the status of a secretary of legation as a result of his vigorous defense of the Icelandic position instead of his own. I could also mention another aspect of him. As I said, he was a bachelor. For some reason, he took a shine to my good wife Nonie. He began to ask her to preside as the hostess at his bigger dinner parties. So he would send his chauffeur out to my

house, pick up my wife, and take her to be the hostess at his dinner parties while I baby-sat at home. (Laughs)

LC: Now how did that go down, Joe? I mean, did you—were you all right with this?

JM: I went along with it. It didn't last too long and we liked the guy. There was no romantic, any kind of romantic attachment. He just wanted an official hostess for his dinner parties.

LC: He had observed all the available or even unavailable women and determined that your wife was the one?

JM: That's right. The British residence then was in an old-style Icelandic building. Old-style Icelandic buildings were built of corrugated tin on the outside. The old residences, and the British one was of that sort. It was a sizeable building for Reykjavik, still not very big, but built of that. Interestingly, it was the building where the meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev in the 1986 summit in Iceland were held. By that time, the building had been reacquired by the Icelandic government. It was the site of the meetings between those two.

LC: That's extremely interesting. I actually have a mental picture of that building.

JM: Oh, you do? Good.

LC: Yes, absolutely. So that was the British legation?

JM: That was the British legation. We also had a Danish legation, and I believe they had a lady Danish ambassador. I might interject here that Iceland had been controlled by Denmark for many centuries until it got its independence, total independence during World War II in 1944. The Icelanders still, though they loved to go to Copenhagen, still didn't in a way have any great love for the Danes. This Danish lady ambassador was a politician, not a career diplomat. She was a Danish politician. She had been appointed by the Danish government to head the legation there. She was not particularly diplomatic. The Icelanders certainly had no love at all for her. Her number two was a career Danish diplomat who had already been an ambassador. He agreed to accept the number two position in her mission in order to try to keep her in order. We even had some personal experiences where she was not particularly diplomatic as far as

we were concerned. I think I happened to be away at one stage on an official trip down to the continent of Europe, when she invited Nonie for a dinner she was having. She started attacking me for some reason at the dinner for what I was doing in the Marshall Plan. Nonie was rather offended by it.

LC: Yeah.

JM: By that. Now in addition to those two, there was also a French legation. There were the Norwegian and Swedish legations, a—yes, a Russian one.

LC: Yes.

JM: I'm sure there was a Russian one.

LC: Yes. I was going to ask you about that.

JM: Yeah. There was a Russian one.

LC: Did you see the Soviet diplomats at all?

JM: No. At that stage—you know, I really have no recollection of the Soviet diplomats in Iceland, for some reason.

LC: Interesting.

JM: Maybe they didn't even come out for official functions, as I have no recollection of them.

LC: Yeah. That's possible. Things were very—

JM: I do. I do in Madagascar, but not in Iceland.

LC: Well, we shall ask you about that in due course. Joe, let's take a break for today.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [7] of [57]
Date: August 5, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the fifth of August 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech and I am speaking with the ambassador by telephone. He is in Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: We wanted to, I think, make a couple of concluding remarks about your time in Iceland.

JM: Yeah. I just wanted to mention the farewell party when I left Iceland, which was given for me by the foreign minister, which impressed me very much, since I was still very much a junior officer, to have a foreign minister of even a small country like Iceland to give the farewell dinner in his home for me I thought was—dinner and party, actually. I think the party went until 2:00 or 3:00AM.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Yeah. Well, the Icelanders love a good party. We had an adage among the Americans. Don't put out full bottles of liquor when you have Icelanders, because they'll stay until the last bottle has been drunk.

LC: You learned this—

JM: Be sure you have partly-used bottles when you entertained them. This I considered a very considerable honor, since he was a foreign minister. Also because I learned relatively early there that the Icelanders are extremely reserved vis-à-vis foreigners and do not accept and do not invite them into their homes until they have tested the foreigner completely. They want to be sure that the foreigner recognizes Iceland, despite the fact that they only had two hundred thousand people when we were there, as a country absolutely equal and sovereign to any other country. That we don't look down our noses or make fun of it in any way. Once they feel that we treat them as absolute equals, and if you're insincere about it they recognize it immediately—

LC: Really?

JM: But once they feel that you are sincerely friends and respectful of their country, then they're prepared to be very warm and to welcome you into their homes. So that was an additional reason that I appreciated this very much. I remember one of my colleagues in the embassy who in fact eventually married an Icelandic employee of the embassy, said that though he had given many parties entertaining Icelanders, he was never invited into their homes. We managed—I think we established a sufficient degree of rapport with them that we were often invited to their homes. As a matter of fact, one of the wives of an official I dealt with a lot when my wife was pregnant sort of considered herself the surrogate mother of my wife, this young lady who was pregnant in Iceland.

LC: That's wonderful, the degree to which you were taken in.

JM: Yeah. But we grew to like Iceland very much. As a matter of fact my wife, after we had been there two years and two months and were getting ready to leave, was very reluctant to do so.

LC: Really?

JM: She had become so much—come to feel so much at home in that country and with the Icelanders that she hated to go.

LC: Yeah.

JM: So we look back on that experience both personally and professionally, because I learned a great deal in my job in Iceland with the greatest of pleasure and feel that we benefited a great deal from it. That's what I wanted to wind up our Icelandic tour with.

LC: Okay.

JM: We flew back to the States in December, leaving Iceland in December in a roaring blizzard at the airport, spent a couple of months' leave in the States, and then took a ship across the Atlantic for our new assignment in Switzerland. The ship, as I recall, was the *America*, which was one of the principal liners, ocean liners then extensively used across the North Atlantic. We sailed from New York for Le Havre and even took our car with us on the ship and waited in Le Havre until the car was unloaded and then started to drive off from there across France to Switzerland. We stopped in Paris overnight with a college classmate and his wife, and then spent another night at an old

mill hotel and restaurant which had been recommended to us by my wife's brother, who had been working for the Marshall Plan in Paris for a couple of years. Then the last day, we mounted the Jura Mountains to cross into Switzerland. As we started to go up the mountains, we encountered thick snow about a yard high. I had to get out and put the chains on the car, but fortunately I had a different car and chains from the one I'd had in Iceland, which I think I mentioned in that last interview.

LC: Yes.

JM: These proved to be very easy to get on. So we drove with chains on most of that day. After we crossed the border into Switzerland, just ahead of us on the road a little mini car turned over on the icy road on its side. We weren't so close enough that we couldn't easily stop. The people started crawling out of it, you know with the side up. The driver lit a cigarette as he was coming out, and I could see the gasoline pouring out of the car.

LC: Oh, no.

JM: That obviously worried me a great deal. I finally convinced him he ought to get rid of that cigarette right away. But we arrived in Bern after dark in the evening and checked in to the *ponceau* hotel, which also—a part of which in a building which [later] housed the American Embassy at that point. So we were in that hotel for three months before we could find housing in Switzerland.

LC: Wow.

JM: Now, Laura, I would like to pause a little bit to describe Switzerland because in many ways it was and I believe still is a unique country. It's as, I think most Americans do feel, among the most beautiful, perhaps *the* most beautiful country in the world, as one travels around it. Perhaps it was a little more beautiful during our time there in the 1950s than today, when one travels primarily on four-lane highways and breezes past a lot of what—and the more leisurely time when we had to travel on two-lane, more crowded roads. But that enabled us to take in the atmosphere of the villages, the houses in the countryside, perhaps better than one does today if one just travels through on these superhighways.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: But it is a gorgeously beautiful country. There can be no question of that at all. As far as the people are concerned, they are also remarkable in their way. It is probably—well, it's one of the few countries, I was going to say probably the only one, but perhaps not, in which three different nationalities, German, French, and Italian, have managed to stitch together a country which has been in existence for a long time and which has proved remarkably stable both politically and economically. When one thinks that in most countries in which you have this kind of situation where you have diverse populations, it's very hard even to hold a country [together]. Switzerland's history is indeed remarkable in that sense.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JM: There are the three languages used in the government. As a matter of fact—the French, German, and Italian—as a matter of fact, there is a fourth official language in Switzerland which nobody has ever heard of outside of Switzerland called Romansch, which is spoken in two mountain valleys in the southeasternmost canton in Switzerland. The individual states composing the country are called cantons there. That canton is well known to most people as the site of the famous sites of Davos and Saint Moritz. But there are these two valleys where this language different from the others. I suppose, I don't know it, I suppose it's closer to Latin than anything else in view of its name Romansch, is still spoken.

LC: It is one of the official languages in the country?

JM: It is considered an official language, yes. The government is also in many ways unique. Switzerland is a federal state, just as the United States is. But in Switzerland, the cantons have much more power and authority than even our states do in this country. The central government is considerably less important there than it is here. In some ways, the nature of the government is similar to ours, in other ways, quite different. There are two houses in the parliament. The lower one, which like our House of Representatives, is constituted on the districts from which the representatives are elected are determined by population. The upper house, just as our Senate does, provides representation from the individual cantons with even small cantons having, as I recall, the same number of representatives in the upper house that our Senate does, as you know. We have just the two from every state, no matter what its population is. The executive

branch of the government, however, is utterly different from ours because it is a collegial government of seven members, each of which has as much power as any other. No decision can be made except by a majority vote of the seven. There is a president elected by the seven members each year, but he is simply a ceremonial head more or less like the monarchy in Great Britain. So normally the seven finally agree unanimously on any measure that is taken, even though the seven—were composed when I was there and I believe still are—representatives of all four main political parties in the country. When I was there, they were the parties were the Radicals, who were actually very conservative, despite their name.

LC: Really?

JM: The Catholic Party, the Socialists—those three were the bigger parties. They each had two of the posts in the seven-man federal council. The seventh representative came from the People's Party, which was the smallest of the four. Any measure that was adopted by that government went through an intense process of consultation with all groups that were interested. I don't think any measure was ever proposed that didn't require at least a year or two of consultation through various commissions and committees with interest groups in the population before it was even taken up by the seven-man executive government, which was called the Federal Council. Then submitted to the two houses of the parliament for consideration by them with a full report about everything that had been gone one with respect to that proposal before. So it's a very deliberative government. Even with this very careful process of legislating, any measure of importance in Switzerland adopted as law by the parliament and the—after its approval by the Federal Council—is usually submitted to referendum by all of the population.

LC: Really?

JM: Yes.

LC: Wow.

JM: A certain number of signatures has to be collected in order to trigger the referendum process, but the number is so small that most measures of importance are subject to a referendum. As I recall, a referendum requires approval not only by a majority of the voters, but also by a majority of the cantons. I'm not sure I remember the

precise figure. I think it was twenty-one cantons. So you see, that can be a very difficult process, too.

LC: Yeah. There's not a lot of change happening quickly.

JM: No. It's remarkably, remarkably stable. In addition to referendum, there is also an initiative process, which is pretty extensively used. So it is a country which though it has some similarities to our governmental system, is also quite different in many respects. In a lot of respects, really unique in the way it is structured and the way it operates.

LC: How did the different nationalities play into the political process? Are there certain parties affiliated or represented?

JM: No. Actually, the—well, the three bigger parties were represented in all of the—there was only one Italian-speaking canton. So I'll think primarily of the German and the French. The three principle parties were represented in both linguistic areas. There were, I think, five or five-and-a-half cantons, which were French. The majority of it was German. So the political parties didn't break down according to linguistic groups, which was one reason that there was this remarkable cohesion despite the differences in language and cultural background.

LC: How do the traditional, sometimes overstated, animosities between the French and the Germans get moderated within the Swiss context?

JM: Well, it had become very much a tradition for them to work together. There are certainly recognizable differences in dealing with these people in their temperament and in their personalities, but they do tend to work together despite the differences in language backgrounds. It's a phenomenal situation, when one stops to think about it.

LC: Absolutely. When one thinks of ethnic conflict and the histories behind ethnic conflict in other countries where you have these kinds of divisions and how that plays out in the political process in such a different way, it is really quite extraordinary.

JM: Laura, I'll just mention one thing. The ethnic differences to some extent still operated in Switzerland when we were there. For example, the canton of Bern was overwhelmingly German, but there was a small section in the northwest which was French-speaking. While I was there, the people in the French-speaking one were agitating for a separate canton. As I recall, maybe not while we were there but maybe

later, they eventually got if not a whole loaf, at least half a loaf in that respect. So there were—but they were interested in having a separate canton because the cantons were so important in this federal structure. It didn't really affect what happened on the national scene. This didn't prove to be a real ethnic issue between all of the French cantons and all of the German cantons. It was simply an issue within the canton of Bern itself.

LC: Perhaps the vitality of the deliberative processes that you've outlined is also one of the pieces that helps moderate potential conflict.

JM: Yes, right. The economy was just as stable when we were there as the country was politically. I think unemployment, as I recall, was somewhere between ten and a hundred nationwide during all the time we were there. There were no, certainly no major strikes. I think major strikes had been outlawed in 1937 by an agreement between the trade unions and the employers. Then there was a very extensive consultation process constantly invoked to resolve any issue which arose between labor and employers. So the country was not handicapped economically by extensive strikes, as was occurring during that postwar era in so many countries in Western Europe and in the United States, too, as a matter of fact.

LC: That's right. Including France and Germany, but particularly France comes to mind.

JM: Exactly. France and Italy, Italy also, and the UK as you remember.

LC: Yes. That's right. The structure of the economy, can you give a bit of a pencil sketch of that?

JM: Well, Switzerland is a country, despite its richness, is virtually devoid of natural resources. This is another remarkable phenomenon. Here's a country with virtually no natural resources of its own, which even then was one of the wealthiest countries in the world and still is. It is primarily a—was then primarily a manufacturing and trading country. Agriculture was and is still highly protected, because the Swiss, like so many countries in the world, feel that they need to assure their food supply in case of trouble in surrounding areas.

LC: Yes.

JM: It's useful to remember that during virtually all of World War II, Switzerland was totally surrounded by German occupied—countries occupied by Hitlerite Germany,

every one of them. So that added to the Swiss desire to protect their food supply. So even though agriculture was not a large component of the gross national product, it was still considered extremely important by the country for food security reasons. It was and is essentially an industrial and trading country in the way people make their living and in contributions to the GNP (gross national product).

LC: Now, Joe, you started off in the economic section?

JM: That's right, I did.

LC: Were you—

JM: Before I get to what I'm doing, may I just describe—

LC: Okay. Sure. Please.

JM: I want to say another word or two in general about Swiss foreign policy.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: The major tenet of Swiss foreign policy, when I was there and still is, the neutrality of the country. Switzerland has not been engaged in any war since, I think, 1848. So the Swiss highly value their neutrality policy. They maintained it during both World Wars I and II. During World War II despite and perhaps partly because they were surrounded by German-occupied territory and they still hold firmly to that policy today. Switzerland did not even become a member of the United Nations until, I believe, they did relatively recently. Because every time it came up for a vote earlier, it was rejected by the population in referendum. I think finally Switzerland did a few years ago vote to become a member of the UN, but it is still not a member of the European Union.

LC: Now what was the basis for this rejection in the popular mind?

JM: Well, they thought that it could impinge on their neutrality, that they could be forced to take certain actions, which would not be consummate with their long-established neutrality policy.

LC: Okay.

JM: That's, I think, also the reason they have not joined the European Union even today. As far as the United States was concerned, this meant that the U.S. interests in Switzerland were largely economic. There was really nothing we could do to influence Swiss foreign policy in any major way in view of their overwhelming attachment to neutrality. Laura, I just might add one other political fact of interest.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: When I was there, women were still not permitted to vote. That came along much later during the second half of the twentieth century, when women were finally authorized to, by referendum, by changing the constitution through referendum, to vote in that country. Now I'd like to say a few words about the structure of the embassy. Actually when I arrived, our diplomatic mission was still officially a legation and not an embassy. The reason being that the government of Switzerland had agreed to the establishment of only one embassy in that country. That was the embassy of France because Napoleon had insisted upon this during his conquests. He did invade Switzerland during his conquests in the early part of the nineteenth century. So the French have had an embassy there ever since the time of Napoleon, but the Swiss didn't want any other foreign diplomatic mission raised to the status of legation because they felt if the U.S. or any other country did that, then Switzerland would have to raise the status of its mission in Washington from that of a legation to that of an embassy and it would cost more money. That was the basic motivation. They didn't want to have to spend more money. But the Swiss did finally agree during my stay there to have the status of the U.S. and quite a number of other countries raised to that of an embassy. When I arrived there in our legation, our minister was a political appointee, not a career man. He had already served as ambassador to Yugoslavia and Poland. He was a very heavy contributor to the Democratic Party. He was a bit of a disaster, as a matter of fact. One time, the *chargé d'affaires* in the absence of the ambassador of the Syrian Embassy came to call on him, I guess making his courtesy call. The minister asked him to find his country on the map and they got the foreign minister so confused, he couldn't even locate his own country on the map. This is how dumb he was. Then this minister left Switzerland the Republicans and Eisenhower had taken over as president, so he was replaced. He became the official greeter in New York City, which was a very good job for him. That he was effective in. He was succeeded by remarkably enough, a lady, a lady career officer from our service, the first career officer to achieve the status of chief of mission. We had proposed to Switzerland to raise the status of legation to that of an embassy. She arrived as an ambassador. The Swiss had agreed to it. She arrived as ambassador. Even though women couldn't vote, she proved to be remarkably acceptable

to the very conservative Swiss government primarily because she was a career employee. Switzerland had had so many political hacks as their ambassadors earlier, that they welcomed this lady as our chief representative.

LC: Now who was this, Joe?

JM: Frances Willis. She was a very interesting lady. She subsequently was ambassador in both Norway and Ceylon. She achieved the remarkable status of becoming a career ambassador. Now this is a technical term in a sense, but it is the highest career rank in the Foreign Service. It was considered the equivalent of five-star general. We never had more than five or six career ambassadors. We had many ambassadors around the world, including about seventy percent of whom were career officers, but only about five or six were career ambassadors. So I had the highest respect for this lady. I liked her very much. I liked working for her. I don't think she would've become a career ambassador had she not been—I hate to say this to you, Laura.

LC: That's okay.

JM: Had she not been a woman and our first career lady to become head of the diplomatic mission.

LC: There was something—

JM: That helped her to be promoted to career ambassador status.

LC: There was something distinctive about her because she was a woman that was in some way advantageous?

JM: Exactly.

LC: Now you mentioned that she had been ambassador to Norway? That's after.

JM: That was subsequently. So subsequently, she became ambassador of Norway and then to Ceylon when Ceylon had a lady president or prime minister.

LC: Prime minister.

JM: Madame Bandaranaike.

LC: Do you see some kismet there, as well, that she was appointed to Ceylon because there was a female?

JM: Yes, because there was a lady head of the government there. That I'm sure was the reason she was sent to Ceylon. I don't know that Norway then had a—I think

they now have a head of government who was a lady, or did recently, but I'm not sure they did at that time.

LC: Now, do you know anything else about the earlier elements of her career path?

JM: No. She had been, I think—she had done a great deal of work in the administrative section and had also done some work in the substantive area. But she was a very meticulous lady. Partly, I think, because she was not extremely busy in Switzerland where our interests were so limited, she got herself very deeply involved in a lot of administrative questions at our embassy. She spent many weeks and months with certain elements of our staff, developing a very detailed plan for the administration of the embassy and another very detailed plan on protocol on which she was a real expert. I don't think I've mentioned this to you before. One of the protocol things I learned from her was that at a dinner party, the ranking lady always after dinner is seated on the right-hand side of the biggest sofa in the drawing room. Had you ever heard of that rule?

LC: No. I have not. (Laughs)

JM: So, yeah. I think that both you and I knew that in a car, the ranking person should be on the right, whether it's military or non-military.

LC: Yes. That's correct.

JM: But I had never heard that rule with respect to a drawing room before.

LC: Extended to the sofa.

JM: Yes. I must say whenever we had her at our house for a meal, she always made a beeline for the right-hand seat in that sofa after dinner. I think her interest in so much detail about administration protocol, I think, annoyed some of the people in our embassy because she spent so much time, required them to spend so much time on what they considered more or less make-work directives, which she drew up and I think sent to all of our consular posts in Switzerland as well.

LC: I wonder if this sort of preoccupation with protocol came from some early background of hers. Do you know whether she came from a privileged—I would gather probably privately educated?

JM: I don't—you know, I don't—Laura, I wouldn't say the family was privileged. They probably were well enough off. Actually, her mother was in

Switzerland with her. Her mother was in her eighties. She came from the South. She still betrayed her Southern origins, because the ambassador always had to be careful that her mother wasn't put into a situation when she'd start to say something about the black race.

LC: Oh, okay.

JM: Because the old Southern prejudices could come out from Mama. The other thing the ambassador had to be careful of—Mama liked her drinks a bit. The ambassador was always extremely careful to be sure that Mama only had two at a cocktail party or before a dinner party.

LC: That was all decided in advance.

JM: Yes, right. As a matter of fact—oh, another protocol thing she insisted upon Laura, when she gave a cocktail party or reception, she insisted that in our rather large residence with lots of room, she insisted that an officer of the embassy be stationed in each room, each of the public rooms, sitting rooms, drawing rooms, so on. Even if nobody was in there that officer had to stay there in case somebody drifted in, so as to be sure that guest had someone to talk to. This was another of her protocols.

LC: Wow.

JM: Rules. In some ways as you can see, she could be very difficult to work for. I always enjoyed very good relations with her and liked her very much. Again as I say, I don't think she was the ablest officer in our service. I remember another interesting incident. One day we had a visit from Jimmy Riddleberger, who was an extremely capable senior ambassador who I think was then our ambassador to Yugoslavia. This was during the years not long after Tito had broken with Stalin, when Yugoslavia was an extremely important ambassadorial post for us. He happened to be in Switzerland. My wife—not my wife, my ambassador invited him for lunch and she also asked me to get some prominent Swiss. So I had among other people, the editor of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, which was the biggest newspaper in Switzerland and probably at that juncture and may still be, the finest newspaper in the world. It had three editions per day and nothing repeated in any of those editions. A very highly-respected newspaper, which then and I think probably still, does put out a weekly English-language supplement. It's a German-language paper. Positively fine newspaper, which the—not only its news

reporting but its editorials were highly respected throughout Europe and I'm sure still are. But we had him and several other people. I think at the luncheon, the discussion turned to Yugoslavia because we were having the ambassador to Yugoslavia. Our ambassador expressed extremely frank opinions on very many things. I remember after it was over and the guests had all left, Ms. Willis turned to me and said, "Well, if that's the way an ambassador should conduct himself or herself, I'm not sure I'm a very successful ambassador." Because she was always extremely cautious in any remarks she had to make. But a senior officer like Riddleberger, who was involved deeply in policy—he subsequently became the head of the aid agency in Washington—could be quite outspoken and certainly influence policy in the United States more than Frances Willis could.

LC: Absolutely. Yes. Absolutely.

JM: Now to more mundane things.

LC: Well, these I'm sure will be just as interesting. You began—

JM: I began in the economic and commercial section. Again I'm going to make one general remark. The embassy, or what was the legation when I arrived there, was very extensively overstaffed. A few months later, Eisenhower became—I arrived there in February of '52. A few months later, Eisenhower was elected president. The new administration in early '53 with Dulles as secretary of state decided to cut back very, very extensively on Foreign Service staffing in Switzerland, which was so overstaffed. We had five officers in the economic section when I arrived there. It was cut by Dulles to two. We had four officers in the political section. It was cut to one. So you can see how—and we had two science attachés, and their positions were both eliminated.

LC: Really?

JM: So you can see how extensively the new Republican administration cut back. It was true not only in the Foreign Service, but the Civil Service as well. I know about that quite intimately from a personal standpoint because my wife's stepfather then headed in the State Department, when Dulles took over, headed a unit in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research dealing with United Nations intelligence. Dulles decided to eliminate that unit completely. My father-in-law was RIF'ed totally from the government.

LC: Really?

JM: Always held it against—he was in his fifties then. So he decided to retire. But he always had a great grudge against Dulles because my father-in-law liked what he was doing. He had been a lawyer in New York before World War II, became an—he spoke German before he ever spoke English because he'd had a German governess as a child. Therefore during World War II he became an officer in the Navy and spent World War II in Naval Intelligence, stayed on in Naval Intelligence in uniform until 1947. After CIA was brought into being, he headed a new unit in CIA dealing with United Nations intelligence. That unit had been transferred bodily from CIA to the State Department, I think around 1950 or '51. Then when Dulles came in the whole unit was abolished totally.

LC: Can you go ahead and give—

JM: My poor father-in-law lost what he considered the most enjoyable job he'd ever had in his life. So in his fifties he retired to Connecticut.

LC: Now what—can you give us his name, Joe?

JM: Yeah. Julian D. Rosenberg.

LC: Where was he born?

JM: Oh, he was born in New York. He came of German-Jewish origin. His forebears had left Germany during the revolution of 1848, had settled in Baltimore, and then in the 1870s, moved to New York City where they bought one of the brownstones on the East Side, East 83rd Street. That house was still in the family when I married my wife, the stepdaughter in 1946. In fact, our wedding was held in that house.

LC: Really?

JM: So he was born in New York, but his father was an importer mainly from Germany. When the stepfather was younger before World War I, the family went every year, every summer to Germany. That indicates the close links between the German Jews in New York and Germany, which still existed prior to World War I, in contrast of course, to what happened under Hitler. The family still had very close connections and lots of relatives in Germany. My father-in-law, my stepfather-in-law as I said, had a German governess when he was very young. He was the only child and actually learned German before he did English in New York.

LC: What happened with the broader family during World War II? Do you know anything about that?

JM: Well, I think in the mean—during the period between World Wars I and II, I think most of those who had remained in Germany, most if not all had come to the States.

LC: They had gotten out?

JM: Because I don't recall any immediate members of Julian Rosenberg's family who suffered under Hitler. So I think they had come to the States. Even though a lot of them, even during the years after World War I, before Hitler came to power, still maintained close relations with, I suppose, friends and maybe more distant relatives in Germany.

LC: Sure. That's very—

JM: Interesting connection.

LC: Absolutely interesting, and also interesting is the whole scale back of the Foreign Service overseas postings, anyway, that you're describing.

JM: Well, not only that, but as I say even in the Civil Service in the State Department, with my stepfather-in-law's unit totally abolished. So the Republicans came in to power in 1953, determined to reduce the size of government, and in many ways justified, because as I said our embassy in Bern was grossly overstaffed when I arrived.

LC: Was any of that staff-cutting do you think influenced by the rise and full flowering of McCarthyism?

JM: No. I don't think so.

LC: This was completely separate?

JM: I don't think it had anything to do—I think it had to do with budgetary factors.

LC: Costs. Okay. You mentioned that the Bern legation was paired back quite substantially. Did that happen across the board, political section as well? You mentioned the science attachés were gone.

JM: Well, I said the political section was cut back from four officers to one.

LC: That's incredible.

JM: It really was. I found when I got there and was assigned to the economic and commercial section I was doing work which I thought was very inconsequential because

of the overstaffing. I was doing certain economic reporting of the kind, which I had been doing when I started out in Istanbul in 1946. So I felt I wasn't learning a thing. The one area in which I was having a new experience and learning something during that first year when I was in the economic and commercial section, was that I also had responsibility for labor reporting. Labor was an area with which I was quite unfamiliar with when I undertook this. I had no experience in it before. So I had to initiate contacts with the Swiss labor movement. I found this very interesting and by far the most stimulating part of what I was doing. After my first year when I was switched over to the political section from the economic section, I took the labor function with me. So I had the labor function all during the entire period of three years and four months that I was in Switzerland. I mention this in particular, Laura, because the head of the Swiss labor union movement, an old gentleman in his seventies by the name of Conrad Ilg, I-L-G, was the kind of figure that one thinks of when one recalls George Meany here in the States, who for so many years and decades headed the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations). Ilg was his earlier equivalent in Switzerland. I used to go over to his office, call on him periodically and figuratively sort of sit at his feet and listen to this old seer talk about things both past and current and learned a good deal from him. One of the points he made not just once but a number of times to me—this was 1952-53. He said, "You Americans are now occupying Germany." He said, "The thing that you must do is to make sure that Germany remains prosperous," as it had become in the post-World War II period under our occupation, "And never again confront that terrible problem of depression and unemployment," which in his view was the principle factor which had brought Hitler to power back in 1933. I think that there was a great deal to what he said. I don't think that the economic conditions in Germany were the only factor, but they certainly were an important one and perhaps the most important one bringing Hitler to power in '32-'33.

LC: And gaining him the popular support that he clearly had.

JM: Exactly. The German economy was in even worse shape than unemployment as a percentage of the population. It was even higher, I think, than in the States. So that plus the fact that ten years earlier, Germany had gone through one of the worst inflations any country has ever suffered where a loaf of bread came to cost millions

of marks. So this meant that the savings of most Germans, except in property, savings were completely wiped out. I'm sure that when Hitler began to rise to power during the latter part of the 1920s and the early '30s, there must have been an immense number of Germans who still recalled that nightmarish situation. Even if they weren't unemployed, the Germans who had been better off recalled that terrible experience they had passed through, and that was also an economic factor which I think undoubtedly helped to contribute to Hitler's rise to power. I think it must have been constantly held as a black mark against the Weimar Republic, the one that had been constantly held as a black mark against the Weimar Republic the one that had been established after the kaiser's abdication in 1918.

LC: Right. Joe, as you point out, that would be particularly an important catalyzing event for middle classes who are trying to save forward.

JM: Exactly. Laura, I want to raise a—I'm going to digress for a moment. I hope you don't mind.

LC: That's fine. No. That's fine.

JM: I want to raise one point with respect to this great inflation in 1923 which had been brought up by my Jewish stepfather-in-law. I've never heard it raised by anybody else, Jewish or non-Jewish. I remember his saying to me one time that during that great inflation, when the Germans were—so many Germans of consequence and middle class were wiped out, that quite a number of Jews came in from Eastern Europe and bought up German properties for a song. That this was a factor in the anti-Semitism which increasingly developed in Germany in the '20s and, of course, even much more so in the '30s. Now, I've never heard anybody—I've never read anything about this. I've never heard anybody else mention this. It would seem to me that for some graduate student or some academic researcher looking for a topic to work on, this might be a unique field in which to begin to do some research.

LC: I'm very glad you mentioned it.

JM: It could also a dangerous field, because it's so easy to be tarred as anti-Semitic when one gets into this area.

LC: Yes. Yes. That's right.

JM: It's sort of a tantalizing thought out there.

LC: And a provable one. You know, testable hypothesis.

JM: Exactly. Yeah, it would require a lot of research in Germany itself, I think, but I would be very interested in seeing something on that if anybody ever gets involved.

LC: Okay. I'm very glad you mentioned it. I haven't heard that argument either, but an interesting one. Usually, as you know, the sort of standard interpretation is that there was a tradition of anti-Semitism, which is certainly true, but—

JM: Yeah, but well you know, I wonder about that in view of the fact that prior to World War II and certainly in the immediate post-war period and prior to World War I, I should say. In the immediate post-war period and even during World War I, the German Jews identified themselves very closely with Germany during all that era, extremely closely, even the Germans, those of German Jewish extraction in the U.S. So I wonder how much anti-Semitism had been prevalent in Germany prior to that time. Again, that's an interesting point to look into.

LC: Yes, and as you say, merits fairly deep examination. Maybe someone will be inspired to take that up. Someone with the requisite skills.

JM: I want to mention a few other things, which—these factors have given rise to in my mind. Some of which, I think, have probably been explored, but I wonder whether sufficiently.

LC: Okay.

JM: Hitler came to power in early 1933, when Germany was in dire straits economically. Within a relatively short period of time, in two or three years, the measures that had been taken by Hitler's government seemed to have pretty much resolved the German economic and unemployment problems. Now if that is correct, and that's my understanding that it is correct, it is one of the most remarkable quick economic recoveries in history. Certainly much faster than under Roosevelt in the United States where, despite the New Deal, we still had seventeen percent unemployment when World War II broke out in September 1939. That seems to me to be another fertile area for investigation. I'm sure that one of the reasons, perhaps *the* reason that Hitler was able to resolve this so quickly is that he was beginning to engage in a rearmament program and certainly he was engaged in the initiation and spreading of the German superhighway program, the *Autobahn* program. All that must have provided a great deal of

employment. Certainly rearmament would—we know that our great unemployment problem here in the States was resolved by the fact that the world was at war. War industries even before we got into the war were rapidly developing in the States because of materials that were being sold to the countries already engaged in war. So war and, rearmament and war can help a terribly struggling economy obviously. That's probably part of the answer in Germany, just as it was I think the main factor here in the States.

LC: But I think as you're suggesting, there are a number of other elements that bear examination.

JM: There may have well been. I just wonder whether that is another area for at least academic investigation.

LC: I think I might be interested, for example, in the issue of currency stabilization during this period, '33-'34, because, of course, both countries, the United States and Germany, were looking at destabilized currencies.

JM: You know, one thing that I even encountered after World War II was a device for fostering increased German trade, a device fostered by the Nazi economic wizard Hjalmar Schacht. That was the establishment of so-called clearing agreements with foreign countries. Which Germany would sell stuff to, let's say to Turkey, and the equivalent in Turkish lira would be deposited in the so-called clearing account. Then when [Germany] wanted to buy from [Turkey], they would simply draw from that account. [Germany] would not have to [pay in] marks themselves. This resulted, of course, in increased bilateral trading and I think probably also helped Germany. But as far as I know, this idea of clearing account devices for use in building up international trade was one that was initiated by the Germans under Hitler. Though it can be condemned if you're trying to foster a multilateral trade, it probably served its purpose at the time. So that was another device that the Nazis originated in the economic field, as far as I know.

LC: Well, we may be sending graduate students off into the libraries and the great unknown.

JM: Yeah. Now another thing that I think the world tends to forget. Germany, when Hitler took over in 1933, was virtually a prostrate country as far as its military was

concerned because of the provisions of the Versailles treaty, which of course was another factor in Hitler's rise to power.

LC: Sure.

JM: In six short years, from '33 to '39, Germany rose from being virtually a cipher militarily into probably being the strongest military power in the world, capable for quite a number of years of holding off the other biggest military powers in the world, including Russia and the United States. Now that is also a fearsome thing when you stop to think of it, how quickly a country which has no military power can rearm itself, arm or rearm itself and become an immense threat. Again, that's something I think both academics and governmental policy people should bear in mind, something we should never forget.

LC: Yes. You're right. You're absolutely right. Joe, did you have another observation?

JM: Well, there's just one other one.

LC: Okay. That's fine.

JM: Laura. I'm sorry about all these—

LC: No. No. It's actually quite interesting. Please continue.

JM: You know, one of the great debates today is whether preventive war is justified or not. Of course, the Iraq war is the basis of the debate today. This is really not a new issue. You look again at Germany during the 1930s and particularly the—Hitler's march of his troops into the Rhineland, the demilitarized Rhineland in 1936 with orders that if the French or the British reacted militarily, they should be immediately pulled out. Would it not—knowing what we know now, would it not have been far better to have had a preventive war at that time rather that World War II later? That's something that could also be argued as a point today in connection with this debate, could it not?

LC: Yes. It's actually the flipside of the appeasement accusation.

JM: Exactly. That's right.

LC: Yes, which is that, you know, the Western Allies backed away.

JM: This was the first important military move on Hitler's part. If it had been nipped in the bud, maybe we would have saved an immense amount of grief later. Just as I think the Iraq War has probably, certainly has deprived the terrorists from the

possibility of getting from Saddam Hussein the weapons of mass destruction, which I think he would have proceeded to develop had he not been overthrown and had not—had all the UN sanctions and inspections been abandoned. Which they were in effect abandoned until Bush started pushing on Iraq.

LC: Yes. That's right. Are you thinking that Saddam's plan really was to potentially at least to hold open the possibility of transferring weapons of mass destruction to—

JM: Since the objectives of those two groups were the same, that is the primary enemy was the United States and they wanted to do—were prepared to do—I mean, I think the terrorists still are prepared to do anything to inflict damage on us. I think that undoubtedly, the possibility was very real that Saddam—I think he would have proceeded with development of weapons of mass destruction had he not been overthrown. I think that he would have been quite prepared to cooperate. After all, they also had a common enemy in Saudi Arabia. They both wanted to—Saddam wanted to control the oil in Saudi Arabia, and Bin Laden wants to get rid of the government there. So I think that he wouldn't quit, for just as I think today, who knows whether North Korea may someday furnish weapons of mass destruction to the terrorists. If Iran develops them, how about that? We're getting pretty far aside.

LC: A little bit. A little bit, but on the other hand we're also considering, I think, the more general question of whether these historical cases like the occupation of the Rhineland have contemporary value.

JM: Have contemporary relevance, right.

LC: Yes.

JM: Laura, I'll throw out another provocative one.

LC: Sure.

JM: In April 1961, when the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba took place and Kennedy decided against backing up the invasion by the anti-Castroite Cubans, should we have had a preventive war then by supporting those people and overthrowing Castro? Because, what was it, eighteen months later we had the terrible Cuban Missile, nuclear missile crisis, which I think placed the United States in the greatest jeopardy it's been in since the Civil War. Because nobody knew whether Khrushchev was going to launch

nuclear missiles against the United States, including Washington when we said that we would stop Soviet ships if they proceeded toward Cuba and search them for nuclear missiles. Nobody knew whether Khrushchev was going to fire nuclear missiles at us because of this threat on our part, or not. In fact, if Kennedy's claim during his campaign against Nixon in 1960 that the Republican administration had permitted a missile gap to develop in favor of the Russians, had that turned out to be true rather than false as was later found out to be the—even the Democrats became convinced to be the case. Had that been true, I don't think Khrushchev would have backed down. After all, Khrushchev had walked all over Kennedy at their meeting in Berlin in the summer of 1961, and then proceeded to agree to the East German erection of the Berlin Wall. I think that was probably a very significant factor in his decision to try to install nuclear missiles in Cuba. Had the Soviet Union actually possessed nuclear superiority, I don't think he would have ever backed down. In April 1961, three months after Kennedy became president, I don't think he could have known then that his claim of a missile gap was actually incorrect. I think he probably knew that by the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. By the time he had to make the decision as to whether to back up the Bay of Pigs, he could not have known that. So one could argue that preventive war might have been a very significant thing at that point.

LC: I wonder also—?

JM: I speak, from being subjected to this terrible jeopardy that we were in, in October of 1962.

LC: I wonder whether the planning for the Bay of Pigs operation was in fact considered on too small a scale that the planning was simply for an operation that would affect the balance of power in the Caribbean. It wasn't really thought of as broadly as it might have been in terms of strategic relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union.

JM: No. I'm sure that's true, Laura.

LC: In that way, that level of analysis not having been applied in fact deprived the president really of making the decision in April 1961 on that larger field. Instead, he made it on, I think, the smaller field of just what was happening ninety miles from Miami.

JM: Right.

LC: Instead of thinking of this as a broader piece of really, the larger Cold War. Certainly that stamp was on it, but I'm not sure that that was how it was packaged and presented.

JM: Right.

LC: Although this isn't my area of study, it is certainly an interesting, a very interesting problem. Again, points I think to the utility of considering these historical cases as exemplars for what our government faces at this point and will face in the future, too. So, sir, you make a great argument for the study of history.

JM: Exactly. Well, to me, the study of history is—well, as you can see, it's one of the most useful things in which one can engage in. One of my great complaints is that the U.S. government on both the executive branch and the legislative branch does not seem to possess a historical memory to any degree. I could argue this on lots of bases.

LC: Yes. Numerous cases of the lack of historical interest come to mind.

JM: Laura, I lost you for a moment.

LC: Are you there, Joe?

JM: Yes.

LC: Okay. Yes, I was saying that there are many examples where a historical perspective might have been a useful one.

JM: Exactly. Of course, it's not just the government. I think our media also have very little—unfortunately, I'm afraid history isn't taught the way it used to be.

LC: Well, I was going to—that was actually going to be my next question. I wonder if you've followed what has transpired in the academic history.

JM: Not to the degree you have, obviously. But I certainly have and I deplore what has happened. I just finished, Laura, an interesting book by Stephen Ambrose, you know, who has written a number of very good biographies. He wrote a book called *To America*, which you may be acquainted with.

LC: I haven't read it, no.

JM: Well, I commend it to you, because it deals with his, oh, with his experiences as a student and as a member of the academic profession and as a historian and historical writer. His own etymology. He deals with this question of the way history was taught to

him when he was a student in the ’50s and what he continued to encounter as a result of that approach to history which I deplore and he evidently eventually came to deplore as well. I think you’d find that book quite interesting. I didn’t agree with all of it by any means, but I found it a very challenging book.

LC: Well, I’m glad you mention it. I will take a look at it.

JM: Laura, I think we may have gone—well, we’ve gone overtime.

LC: Okay. Well, we’ll stop for today.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [8] of [57]
Date: October 15, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the fifteenth of October 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. Joe is speaking to me by phone from his home in Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: I'm very glad to have the opportunity to resume our interview sessions. I wonder if you can tell me just about the conclusion of your tour in Switzerland and how your next assignment came about.

JM: There was a constant change in what our next assignment was going to be. In, I think, the month of February 1955, I received orders from the State Department, assigning us to Chiang Mai. No country given. I hadn't the slightest idea where it was. I thought it was probably in South America. I looked it up on the atlas, of course, and found it was in northern Thailand. Our lady ambassador, when she learned this assignment, she said, "The State Department can't do that to you, send you to that remote spot with three small children. I'm going back to Washington shortly on consultation with the State Department, and I'm going to get that changed."

LC: Really?

JM: So she came back from her visit to Washington and said, "Your assignment has been changed to Bangkok." I kept waiting for the orders to go to Bangkok. The orders didn't come through. When they finally did come through, it was Jakarta in Indonesia, not Bangkok. So we returned to the States. We left Switzerland in June, took a ship from Genoa to New York for, I think it was nine days, an experience my wife doesn't recall with great pleasure because she was taking care of three small kids on the ship.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: Went on to Washington and learned that I might well be assigned to the consulate in Surabaya in Java, in Indonesia rather than the embassy. Well, as time went

on during our home leave, the department sent me to the Bethesda Naval Hospital for a rather extensive checkup because during the last year in Switzerland, I had had a series of infections. Despite the reputation of Swiss medicine, doctors there hadn't been able to find out the cause, and actually neither did the doctors in Bethesda Naval Hospital. But they did find in the process of examining me, including an X-ray of my abdomen, that I had a kidney stone, which they said was too large to be passed. They supposed I would be in severe pain and need an operation immediately. Well, I had never had any trouble with that, never felt any pain, but the State Department on the basis of that finding decided that my assignment to Indonesia should be completely cancelled because the medical facilities there were not deemed adequate for that kind of an operation. That I should be assigned to Washington instead, particularly since I had been abroad for nine years and hadn't had an assignment to Washington yet.

LC: Yes. Yes. Right. Right.

JM: So all of a sudden, we were thrust upon the State Department. I was thrust upon the State Department for duty in Washington without any preplanning. Actually, the State Department personnel system tries to plan in advance all its moves. The State Department therefore thrust me into the only vacancy which had recently come up, which was in the UN Office of Economic and Social Affairs in the State Department in the Bureau of International Organizations. I didn't particularly like that idea because it wasn't dealing with any of the subjects which really interested me. So the first day I reported on September first, I went in to the director of that office and said that I didn't particularly like the idea of being assigned to his unit. He rather indicated, "Well, if you don't want it, I don't think I want you." So we sort of agreed to—he agreed to let me look for something else. I went back to State Department personnel, was met rather unpleasantly with, "Well, this is what we've assigned you to. If you can find something else, you're on your own to find it."

LC: Okay.

JM: So I sort of walked around the State Department visiting particularly offices dealing with areas in which I had been stationed and rather soon found that the director of the Office of Turkish, Greek, and Iranian Affairs wanted a special assistant. He felt he was so busy he needed somebody to help in an administrative and to some degree

substantive sense. So he took me on for thirty days, but since that was not an officially recognized slot in the table of organization in the State Department, after thirty days that came to an end. But meanwhile, a vacancy had occurred in the Economic Affairs Unit of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. So the State Department decided to put me into that. Now I'd never had any experience, never been close to Southeast Asia at all, but I accepted that rather than going back to the Office of UN Economic and Social Affairs, and found that when I reported there that I was going to deal with economic affairs concerning Thailand and Burma. I actually worked in that unit for about, oh, two-and-a-half years and found it rather interesting, as a matter of fact. Of course, it proved remarkable in terms of my career, because I started there in late 1955 and then spent the bulk of the next fifteen years dealing with Southeast Asia, including two assignments in the area. So a great deal of my career was spent in an area to which I was originally assigned sheerly by chance because it was the only vacancy available. That's the way life works in part, as I think we all know.

LC: That's right.

JM: Some of the things that I dealt with in that job, I found both interesting and instructive in terms of the way the Department of State operates. As I said, I had never had an assignment in the Department of State in Washington before. I had been abroad. So it was also a very good learning process for me. I'll give you an example or two of what I learned in that job. One of the problems that I got involved with rather early was related to Burma. There was considerable—this was the time of the height of the American rivalry with the Soviet Union over less developed countries. We didn't want the Soviets to get a step in advance of us in any of these countries and tilt them toward the Soviet system and away from us. Burma was one that was concerned quite considerably. We didn't have any very good ties to Burma at that point because the Burmese claimed to be rigidly neutral and didn't want any ties. We finally worked—got an interest on the part of the Burmese government in sending in American technicians in turn for the purchase of a million dollars worth of Burmese rice. That was anathema to our Department of Agriculture of course, which had its own rice surpluses to dispose of, so we had trouble there. There was a rather high-level meeting dealing with this question, which included the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs of the

Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, who was the main economic man dealing with the Far East, the man I reported to.

LC: Which was who, Joe?

JM: Howard Jones, subsequently our ambassador in Indonesia for seven years. He was one. A second was the head of the Bureau of Economic Affairs in the State Department, who considerably outranked the man from the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. His name was Prochnow. He was a businessman who was in that job for several years during the Eisenhower administration. The third was the number two man in the USAID agency, by the name of Fitzgerald. He had been in that agency since its beginning. He was in charge of the agriculture division of the old Marshall Plan and had risen to the position of number two in the USAID agency. So it was a fairly high-level meeting. I never saw a greater shamble for a meeting than that one. Everybody expressed a different—all these high-level guys expressed a different view of what we should do. I emerged from that thing—there was utterly no meeting of minds in that meeting at all, but as we left Howard Jones, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs turned to me and said, "Why don't you draft a telegram on the basis of this meeting?" Well, I was sort of nonplussed with that because there wasn't any meeting of minds whatsoever. So I sat down and drafted a telegram, which simply reflected my own views on the issue. I was in favor of it. To my great surprise, it sailed through all three of these high-level people and confirmed something I had heard about but had never actually seen in practice, that policy is often made in the State Department not in any very formal way, but on the basis of cables and that the fellow who drafts the cable has a considerable advantage over everybody else. That was a rather interesting revelation to me the way things operate in the State Department.

LC: Yes, sir. Yes.

JM: Then I'll give you another example of something that I found quite interesting. About a year later—again, this deals with Burma. We learned that the two highest-ranking officials in the Soviet Union—let's see, they were I think Bulganin and Mikoyan I believe at that point—were due to arrive in Burma the next day. Well, we had been trying to establish, get approval in Washington for extending an offer for an aid loan

agreement with Burma and had utterly failed in the bureaucracy there until this news came in from our embassy in Burma. So on the basis of that news, I drafted a telegram, which would authorize a twenty-five million dollar loan agreement offer to the Burmese. Within a few hours, we were able to get that through the bureaucracy, which shows again that when emergency news comes in, you can accomplish things much faster than otherwise. One of the ways which I got it through, I was having great trouble with the lower level people with whom I normally worked, particularly in our Bureau of Economic Affairs. I couldn't get their concurrence at all, but by the time I drafted this telegram, the lower-level people had gone home. So I got the signature of the highest official in that area and took the draft telegram up to the assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, Walter Robertson. This was about 7:00 or 7:30 in the evening. He agreed but he said, "I think I need higher level approval for this major new step in our relations with Burma." Twenty-five million dollars in the mid '50s was a very substantial amount of money, of course.

LC: Yes.

JM: So he picked up the telephone to call John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State and found he had gone home. But he—then I think he called Herbert Hoover, Jr., who was the number two in the State Department. I've forgotten whether he was in the office or had gone home. No, he had gone home. That was it. Interestingly, since this was a highly classified telegram, secret classification, he read the telegram in a low tone of voice over the telephone to the number two official and got his concurrence in sending the telegram out. So this experience also revealed a lot of things that security doesn't always prevail when there's an emergency. Plus the fact that you can get things through our government very quickly then that you couldn't possibly do before. Of course, we've seen that even recently in the way the U.S. government operates, as you know. So I learned a number of things in that experience. Oh, I'll give you another interesting thing.

LC: Sure.

JM: This dealt with Thailand. Our ambassador in Thailand, who had been a close special assistant to the number two man in the State Department, to Herbert Hoover, Jr., before he went out as ambassador to Thailand, sent in a telegram proposing

that the U.S. construct a highway from Bangkok all the way across Asia and on into Europe to tie the area up with Europe.

LC: Oh, my goodness.

JM: One can imagine the phenomenal cost of this thing. So when I saw it, the action copy came to me to draft the reply. I drafted it simply saying in effect, "No," and the deputy assistant secretary for Economic Affairs signed off on it. It went out as a telegram. All telegrams from the State Department go out under the name of the secretary of state, even if the officer who—even when, and this occurs in most cases, the officer authorizing the telegram to go out is a much lower level official. So this went out over Dulles's signature, but the ambassador in Thailand, knowing how the State Department operates, came back with a telegram and said, "I want to be assured that this message that you sent me had the approval of the number two official, Herbert Hoover, Jr., in the department." Well, when this one came in, I got on my telephone with Howard Jones and said, "What do we do?" He said, "Well, look. As far as that ambassador is concerned, he got a telegram signed 'Dulles,' because that's the official position in the State Department." So we just ignored that message and never did answer it, as a matter of fact. So that highway, of course, doesn't exist even today, half a century later.

LC: Joe, let me ask you a couple of questions.

JM: Sure.

LC: First of all, I'm very interested, as I know many modern Asianists are, in Howard Jones. Can you give me your sense of him both as a diplomat in the job that he was discharging, and his character, his learning?

JM: Yeah. I'd be glad to give you my frank assessment of him. Howard Jones, the original impression one got of Howard Jones in talking to him was that he was a bit of a bumbler, but shortly when I got to know him better came to respect him a great deal because his method of negotiating in the Washington bureaucracy was to start out agreeing with his opponent, and then gradually shifting ground around to his position. Often enough, he succeeded in prevailing. I suppose even in that rice-for-technicians deal with Burma, even though he didn't in his meeting get agreement from the others, the telegram I sent through got cleared by them. I don't know whether that was a reflection of his—I don't think it was a—with those guys, I don't know why they ever signed that

telegram, but they did. I was very intrigued with the way Jones negotiated with people, and a rather interesting example of, I think, cleverness and keenness in how to go about this thing.

LC: What was his background? Do you know?

JM: Well, he was a career Foreign Service officer.

LC: Yes.

JM: I don't know what his earlier—oh, I know. I know he had been a military officer during World War II and had maintained his reserve status because I remember seeing him in his office one evening, changing from his civilian clothes into his military uniform to perform his evening reserve duty.

LC: No kidding. That's amazing.

JM: Now, he became—he was so well regarded by the assistant secretary Walter Robertson, who was a very tough man to work for, very difficult taskmaster. But he regarded Jones very highly. When the number two deputy assistant secretary, the political man, when that position became vacant, he moved Howard Jones into that position for several months, maybe even a year before Jones was named ambassador to Indonesia. Now my assessment of Jones's seven years of tenure as ambassador to Indonesia is not good at all. While I came to regard him highly in the State Department, I did not like at all the way he knuckled under constantly to Sukarno there. Sukarno knew how to take advantage of people and took terrible advantage of Howard Jones. Sukarno was no real friend of ours at all. I thought our ambassador should be much tougher. Jones did remain there for seven years. As I say, I do not regard him as a success as our ambassador in Indonesia. I think his successor, Marshall Green, was much superior to him as ambassador there. So there you've got my thumbnail assessment.

LC: Okay. Let me ask about the post of ambassador to Indonesia. I know that when I had my brief encounter with the State Department in the early '80s, certainly that position was regarded as one of the most important American ambassadorships, certainly in the Asian context. I wonder whether that was similarly true in the 1960s?

JM: Oh, yes, very definitely. I think the fact that Jones went out there, since he was so highly regarded by our assistant secretary, indicates the importance that was attached to that post, even in the late '50s. Certainly in the '60s it became even more

important, particularly when the crisis came over Sukarno's rule in '65 and two or three subsequent years when Sukarno and the communists were defeated by Suharto. I don't know whether you've ever seen, Laura, a book, which Marshall Green wrote on his experience in Indonesia and the stance he took in dealing with this issue. It's a fascinating book because Green as ambassador to there kept insisting that the U.S. should stay out—we knew where our interests lay. But he said, "Our interests will be much more likely to be achieved if we refrain from any intervention in this. Let the Indonesian military deal with this problem as far as Sukarno and the communists are concerned without the American hand showing in any way whatsoever." He had to struggle with Washington to hold back the interventionist desire, which is often manifested by our people, but he did succeed. Have you ever seen that book?

LC: I don't believe that I have read it, although I knew that he had written it.

JM: I have it, Laura, and I'll make a note. I'll get the name and the next time we talk I'll give it to you because since you are interested in Indonesia.

LC: I am, actually yes, and particularly—

JM: To me, it's one of the more revealing indications of how an ambassador operates contrary to the usual American approach.

LC: Well, one of the things I think that you're highlighting is that as a diplomatic representative, the ambassador has a different set of, essentially, rules that he must observe that don't apply to some other civilian agencies of the U.S. government. There can be a tension there at times, particularly the crisis in 1965 and '66, with the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia) attempting to essentially take power in Indonesia, which I'd like to talk to you about that crisis in some detail later because, of course, it bears on U.S. policy in Vietnam, or I believe that it does.

JM: I agree with you.

LC: Let me ask you a little bit more about the duties that you were discharging. First, Joe, can you tell me a little bit more about the complement of personnel in the Economic Affairs Office of the East Asian Pacific Affairs, or at that time I guess it was Far Eastern Affairs?

JM: Actually, we had three, and it was just the Economic Affairs Unit of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs.

LC: Okay.

JM: We had a director of that office who reported directly to Jones. He was the official between me and Jones, the Deputy Assistant Secretary. Then we had the two officers under the director, myself, for Thailand and Burma, and one other officer who dealt with Malaysia. I don't know whether Singapore had its independence. I can't remember when Singapore got its independence.

LC: '67. A lot later, I guess.

JM: The economic affairs for Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos were handled by the desk officers. The political desk officers, not by the Economic Affairs Unit. So these were the only countries where the Economic Affairs Unit dealt with Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, and Singapore, if it had become independent by then.

LC: Okay. For Thai and Burmese affairs, did you have a period of reading in so that you would have a sense of the state of play as you came into that post?

JM: Well, as the cables cross your desk and the dispatches from the field, one learns more and more and one can go back into the files and as you just indicated, pick up the necessary background. It doesn't take too long to acquire that.

LC: Did you during this time period actually go out to—

JM: Well, I'll get to that in a moment, Laura. I will mention one other thing, another thing which I learned very much from this tour in the State Department. You know Henry Kissinger as both National Security Advisor and as Secretary of State places great emphasis on what he calls the conceptual approach to foreign affairs. You've heard that term, I'm sure.

LC: Yes, sir. Yes.

JM: He seemed to be trying to indicate that this approach was new in the American foreign policy establishment. It wasn't really at all because I saw that approach operating very much during the years I was in the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. When a country—statements dealing with individual countries were drawn up in the State Department and in the government in general, we used very much the so-called conceptual approach. That is, you look at U.S. interests in the country, the objectives in order to serve those interests, and then the policies, which are aimed to achieve the objectives and serve our interest. That is what the conceptual approach is about, as

Kissinger defined it and as it was operating under the Eisenhower administration. So it wasn't really a new approach. I think at times, there was some loss of sight of this approach in the State Department, but it certainly wasn't new under Kissinger.

LC: Well, sometimes as you know, Joe, things get repackaged and it seems like a whole new product, but it's just different wrapping.

JM: Yeah. You know, one did have to be careful in assessing how well this approach operated. I can remember reading country statements drawn up during that era in which the desk officer for that country would say that one of our principal objectives is to maintain good relations with that country. Well, to me, that is not an objective. Good relations may or may not serve our interests and objectives. Sometimes you got to put a lot of pressure on and alienate people. That is simply a means to an end. Good relations are not an end in themselves.

LC: Let me ask you a little bit more about the relationship with Burma, because as you point out, that was certainly not one that went all smoothly for the United States during the time that you were involved with it. Did the State Department have a particular view of the military in Burma at this time?

JM: Well, we—this, the military took over as I recall, I believe that was 1958, right after I stepped out of the Burmese affair.

LC: Yes. There was a coup. Yes, that's right.

JM: There wasn't strong objection at that time to the military because they had not compiled the kind of records they have compiled since in Burma. So at that point, the kind of opposition, which has existed in recent years in the U.S. establishment to the Burmese military didn't exist at that time.

LC: The Burmese military was very busy at that time, though, trying to handle the internal insurgencies, what some people call the civil wars with the Karens and the others. Was there any degree of U.S. support for those operations?

JM: No. I don't think so. I think we tried to maintain a neutral position, as far as that was concerned without alienating the Burmese government.

LC: Was there concern about—you've mentioned the Soviet Union and the important visit in '56 by Kosygin and his entourage. Was there concern about Chinese communist influence in Burma as well?

JM: Well, at that time, we—obviously, yes. At that time, it was felt within the U.S. government that the interests and objectives of the Soviet Union and Communist China were closely aligned. In other words, the rift hadn't begun to occur at that point.

LC: Okay. So there wasn't a sense of—

JM: Actually, I think the rift actually started—I'd forgotten, as we now know, in whether it was '57, '58, or '59 I've forgotten, when Khrushchev turned down Mao's desire for Soviet help in developing a Chinese nuclear bomb. That was the beginning of I think, in my view anyway, of the rift between the two.

LC: Do you think that—go ahead, Joe.

JM: No. That was just the point that I wanted to make there.

LC: Okay. I just wondered if you had given any thought to Mao's reaction to the death of Stalin. There's some suggestion among Chinese specialists that that was the kind of rolling back of the Stalin cult, Mao saw as possibly applying to him as well at some point.

JM: I think that I would suspect that that was probably also a factor, yes, because that's the kind of thing that could encourage opposition to Mao within the Chinese communist establishment.

LC: Absolutely. But at this point, from the U.S. perspective, the two communist powers were essentially operating on the same plane with regard to foreign policy.

JM: Exactly. Exactly.

LC: Okay. So no sense that the Chinese minority, the ethnic Chinese minority in Burma, was a special source of difficulty or had special connections to Beijing?

JM: No. I don't recall if that was a particular factor. Laura, I do want to add one other thing in connection with this loan agreement offer that we got through the State Department on the basis of the fact that the two chief Soviet leaders were due in Burma the next day. Interestingly, it subsequently took, I think, at least a couple of years to negotiate the terms of that loan agreement with the Burmese.

LC: Is that right?

JM: At least ten years later, the whole twenty-five million had still not been totally committed, though I can't say that that initiative resulted in a great deal in positive terms. The Burmese were very difficult to work with continually. I also came later to

revise my own views as to the importance of the use of aid in our competition with the Soviets.

LC: In what way, Joe?

JM: Then we felt we had to make a better offer in almost every case than they did.

LC: Yes.

JM: The only time when we didn't was with the Aswan Dam, as you know. You remember the results of that one, when we turned Egypt down on that one. But I came to feel later that, "Look, if the Soviets want to waste their money at times in these countries, let them go ahead and do so." I'll just interject at this point, Laura, in a rather amusing little experience when I was director of the aid mission in Laos from '65 to '68. At one point, the first secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Vientiane in Laos came in for a briefing, wanted to get information on the AID program, in effect a briefing. At one point I turned to him and said, "As you know, we have a fund here in Laos, an AID fund to which several countries contribute in order to sustain the exchange rate of the Lao currency, to prevent inflation from developing."

LC: Yes.

JM: He questioned me closely about that, and I said, "Look, if your government wants to come in and make a contribution, we would be delighted to see it." Well, I never saw a Soviet official turn tail faster out of the office when I made this suggestion to him.

LC: Well, this was probably a very important initiative in American foreign policy, which has gone underreported, was the offer of cooperation in supporting Laotian currency.

JM: Right. I knew what the answer would be.

LC: (Laughs) Yes. I'm sure.

JM: But it scared him off very quickly and he stopped fishing very fast at that point.

LC: Well, I wonder, did you have any dealings with the British Embassy in Washington over issues that had to do with Burma?

JM: No. I don't recall any dealing with them at all over Burma at that stage.

LC: Did Burma have regular diplomatic relations with the United States during this period such that there was—

JM: Oh, yes. There was a Burmese ambassador in Washington. I remember being invited to the residence there for parties by the Burmese ambassador. We had an ambassador in Rangoon.

LC: Do you remember who the ambassador in Rangoon was?

JM: Yes. It was Joe Satterthwaite at that point, who was a veteran Foreign Service officer who has held some high posts within the department and subsequently became the first assistant secretary for African Affairs when that bureau was established.

LC: Did you have any dealings with him? Did he pop into Washington at some point?

JM: Well, I had a limited amount of dealings with him. He was a very, very nice and pleasant individual. I can't say I was overly impressed with the capabilities exhibited in my limited dealings, but I will hastily add that my dealings were so limited within that I wouldn't put too much stock in my assessment on that score.

LC: Joe, did you have essentially an opposite number within the embassy in Rangoon that you were passing, I hate to say cables, although that's what they would have been, but letters of information, memoranda and so on back and forth with?

JM: Yes. I think the man was Dick Usher. He, I believe, was head of the economic unit in the embassy in Rangoon.

LC: Was he someone with whom you had later dealings at all?

JM: Yes. I did as a matter of fact. When—let's see. In 1963 when I was assigned to the State Department after my National War College tour as a student for a year, I went into—well, I went nominally into the job of, I guess, United Nations advisor in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. Dick was the planning advisor. Very shortly, the bureau set up a regional office. Dick was named director of the office, and I think I was his deputy very, very briefly.

LC: Okay.

JM: So I worked with him closely. That was just for a few months because then I went back into Vietnam affairs. So I was just—had that close association with him for a

few months. I also knew him well from his messages from the field when he was in Rangoon.

LC: Right. There's sort of a legend about the drafting of cables. You've contributed to it here by giving us an example of how important that exercise could actually be in making a policy. But also, there were certain officials in the Foreign Service who where known for their pithy or humorous or really bad cables. Did you start to see more of that because you were in Washington and pick up more of that kind of the sort of feeling, the *gestalt* of being a Foreign Service officer?

JM: Well, this occurs—in my experience, it occurred fairly rarely. One Foreign Service officer with whom I was very good friends and became very closely associated, Bill Sullivan. Bill was one who did not hesitate in expressing his views very strongly in cables back to Washington. I might interject at this point that Bill was our last ambassador in Iran, as you probably know.

LC: Yes.

JM: He left there before the hostage crisis, but he himself was actually held hostage for a few hours at one point before he left.

LC: Yes, he was.

JM: Bill managed to talk his way out of it. But Bill, when the revolution against the shah came up in late '78, early '79, Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor under Carter, as you remember.

LC: Yes, Zbigniew Brzezinski. It was big news.

JM: He took it upon himself to decide that Sullivan was not opposing the revolution sufficiently and that he should work more closely with the military in supporting the shah. Brzezinski got the senior American military officer in Europe—I think he was that. I can't remember his name now—sent down to Tehran in effect sort of to take over from Bill. Well, Bill fired back telegrams to Washington opposing this very strongly. He knew it was Brzezinski, but he didn't hesitate to oppose it. I think Bill was absolutely right, because the military in Iran, if they saw any real opening for successful opposition to Khomeini's revolution knew that their necks were literally at stake. They would have opposed the revolution, but they knew that the bulk of their troops were at that time supporting the revolution. There was no hope of success in opposing it. So I

think Bill was absolutely right in his assessment, and Brzezinski was totally wrong. I think that shows to me again that Brzezinski had never had Foreign Service experience abroad. He was not a Foreign Service. He was a professor, basically.

LC: That's right. Yes.

JM: Excuse me, Laura.

LC: That's fine.

JM: But I think he was absolutely—if he had known enough, if he'd had enough Foreign Service experience, if he had been through coups himself, I think he would have known how to assess that situation properly. Bill certainly did. But I'm just citing this as an example where Bill took his courage in his own hands, opposed Brzezinski and Carter then wanted to remove Sullivan from Iran. I think in effect did just force him to retire, and he was opposed—Secretary of State Vance upheld Sullivan. Sullivan, I think, would probably have gotten another senior assignment, except he just decided himself to retire. He got a good offer from the private sector and did retire.

LC: Well, Vance is a very interesting case of course because of his long experience, and then rising to become secretary, which just—

JM: Well, he and Brzezinski, of course, didn't get along on a lot of things, as you know.

LC: That's right. Yes, that's right. Did you ever meet Cyrus Vance?

JM: No. I never actually met Cyrus Vance.

LC: Okay. I just wanted to ask.

JM: I don't consider him one of our greats. In many ways, I think Brzezinski was right and Vance wrong, on issues particularly on how to deal with the Soviet Union. But on this particular issue of Iran, I think Brzezinski was thoroughly wrong.

LC: Can you say a little bit more about your assessment of their dealings with the Soviet Union? This would be in the late '70s.

JM: Yeah, right. Well, Carter bent over backwards in order to get along with and I think even appease the Soviet Union. Finally himself when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, sort of said, denied, "Oh, I didn't expect this at all the whole time. I thought things would turn out differently." Whereas, I think Brzezinski was much more realistic

in dealing with the Soviets and continuing to recognize that they still represented our major adversary.

LC: Did you find Carter's appointment of Brzezinski something of a surprise?

JM: I can't really comment on that. I don't really—I suppose looking back, it is a surprise. At the time, I guess I didn't know enough about Brzezinski before he was appointed to form that view.

LC: Okay. Well, let's go back to your story.

JM: Well, Laura, it was—in view of your interest in how the kind of attitude toward Washington, which the ambassador might adopt, I'll give you another example of what I think very great courage on the part of an ambassador. This was Graham Martin, when he was ambassador to Thailand. This was in the—oh, I guess around '63, '64. Graham Martin, after he got out there, worked very closely with the Thai government and was in favor of increasing our military assistance program in order to build them up because of what was happening in Vietnam. McNamara as Secretary of Defense opposed this, strongly opposed this buildup. Then Graham Martin, despite this opposition at the very top in the Department of Defense, carried the issue right to Lyndon Johnson himself and won. That's an interesting example where an ambassador opposed the Secretary of Defense and carried the issue to the president and won out.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the dynamic and the rationale behind the arguments, particularly McNamara's opposition? What was the source of that?

JM: Well, I'm not sure.

LC: Costs?

JM: I think anything I say there would be a guess. I guess he just felt that Thailand would not make that much of a contribution in the war against Vietnam.

LC: Well, we later found that wasn't really the case.

JM: Yeah. Well, actually, of course—we'll get into this. I feel McNamara's political military strategy in the Vietnam War was one of the basic reasons why we lost that war. It was not just his strategy. Actually it was the strategy established by Kennedy and pursued by Johnson, but we can get into that later.

LC: Sure. Let me ask you a little bit more about Thailand in the mid-late 1950s. First of all, Thailand was a formal ally of the United States under the SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) treaty.

JM: Yes.

LC: Did they have in some way—did that give them in some way a greater call on American economic assistance during this period?

JM: No, not at all.

LC: Is that right?

JM: I was going to get shortly to my first trip into that area when I went as a member of the U.S. delegation in the fall of 1957 to the, I guess it was the annual meeting of the SEATO Economic Committee. The head of our delegation was an official from the Bureau of Economic Affairs in the State Department. He was thoroughly opposed to any additional assistance to any of the Asian countries, which had signed up the SEATO treaty. He was representing the position of his bureau there. At that point, that bureau was placing major emphasis on the assistants through the Colombo Plan, rather than through SEATO. He was never really overruled. So the answer to you is, "No." There was no special economic favoritism shown toward our Asian SEATO allies in the distribution of American aid whatsoever.

LC: I made a brief study at some earlier point of assistance to Southeast Asian countries through the Colombo Plan, and specifically at this time—you may remember this, Joe—the Atoms for Peace program was a very important element of American economic assistance. It was thought that research reactors given to these different countries would promote an advancement of science generally and medical uses, particularly these non-military applications of nuclear power.

JM: Then we even negotiated such an agreement with Vietnam.

LC: That is right, Joe. You know the reactor was at Da Lat.

JM: Right.

LC: I believe that there was some French—

JM: I was involved in that negotiation.

LC: Oh, were you really? Oh, goodness.

JM: Oh, yes. I knew very well the man who headed the Vietnamese reactor program. What was his name? Bui Hoi?

LC: I've forgotten it now.

JM: I can't remember all of it either.

LC: What year was that that you were involved in that?

JM: Well, I was—we'll get there short. I was the Vietnam desk officer from March of '58 until I went to Vietnam in the summer of '59 on assignment. So it was some time during that period. It was probably in early '59.

LC: Well, that's certainly something that I would like to ask you about in some detail.

JM: I'm not sure I can give you many details. I've never attached a great deal of subsequent importance to that.

LC: Well, I give that to you as fair warning for you to go through your mental files and think whatever you can dredge up about those talks.

JM: There's not going to be much.

LC: But the Colombo Plan was—am I right in thinking essentially a British-led initiative?

JM: Exactly. That was a British initiative.

LC: Was there then a degree of competition between Britain, although they were operating, I think, on a smaller scale than the United States, and America in trying to penetrate some developing countries with economic assistance and hopefully orient their eventual commercial development?

JM: I never got that sense, Laura.

LC: Okay.

JM: I don't quite know why certain officials in the State Department in the Bureau of Economic Affairs felt that that plan deserved priority over SEATO.

LC: Okay.

JM: Not that SEATO ever proved to be a very successful treaty organization, as you know.

LC: Well, that's right. To what do you attribute that, Joe? I think there are a number of standard answers out there, but I'd be interested on your view on that.

JM: Well, I think probably the basic reason is that it was essentially an artificial organization because the three full Asian members, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan, certainly represented a minority of South and Southeast Asian countries. So we didn't get a very good collection—we didn't get a very extensive collection of allies there, and actually in the '60s, Pakistan was no longer really an ally at all in the SEATO treaty because they were much more interested in establishing close relations with Communist China, as you remember. The free ex-Indochinese countries, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, came under the umbrella of the SEATO treaty, but they were not actually formal members of it. Certainly the French had no real interest in that treaty. The British had a nominal interest in it, I think. They continued to indicate that they were allied with us on it, but I can't say that they assisted very extensively in the implementation of the objectives of that treaty. But in contrast to the NATO treaty, that treaty was not—I don't think had great promise, even at the outset. I understand why John Foster Dulles pursued it. It probably was worth pursuing at the time.

LC: Because why?

JM: Well, because the position of the U.S. and particularly the Eisenhower administration is—well, the U.S. was that we did not want to see the communists advance anywhere in the world because of their objective of shifting the balance of forces in their area. After the Geneva Conference on Vietnam in '54, in which the North Viet—the communists in Vietnam took control of North Vietnam, we tried to erect some kind of barrier against communist advance in South and Southeast Asia. As I say, not very effect even at the outset, since we didn't have several of the countries, including a major country like India, which was no hope of getting at that stage, of course.

LC: Absolutely. That's right. As you noted earlier, the collection of—

JM: You were talking about Indonesia. Sukarno wasn't about to be associated with it.

LC: That's right. That's right. Of course, the British had their own issues in Southeast Asia with regard to decolonization and the—

JM: Now the British I would hasten to add, I think, did a marvelously effective job in their conduct of the guerilla war in Malaya.

LC: Well, it becomes really the touchstone for anti-guerilla operations, for counter-insurgency operations.

JM: In certain contexts, at least. Actually the man, what was his name? Thompson?

LC: Thompson. Robert Thompson.

JM: Robert Thompson. That was his name. Who was, I think, the head police official in this program in Malaya, came up to Vietnam while I was there. I became pretty well acquainted with him, and tried to influence the Vietnamese government—we'll get to that later, too—the basis of his experience and recommendations, Ngo Dinh Nhu, the brother of President Diem, pushed through the Strategic Hamlet Program, which was actually just a sham imitation of what Thompson had done in Malaya.

LC: Right.

JM: We'll get to that later.

LC: Okay. Well, you mentioned that you went out to Southeast Asia in the fall of '57.

JM: Yeah. I went out as a member of this delegation, which didn't amount to anything, but Howard Jones said, "While you're there, since you don't know the"—oh, I was already slated at that point to take over the Vietnam desk at some point in the future. So the director of the Office of Southeast Asian affairs wanted me to spend at least a week in Vietnam to begin to become acquainted with it, which I did. Howard Jones, the deputy secretary I mentioned, said, "While you're out there, why don't you visit a number of other countries and become acquainted with the area as well?" So I did. I started in Burma. As a matter of fact, it was the only visit I ever made to Burma was in Rangoon for a couple of days, and then went on from there to Bangkok for the SEATO meeting and to become somewhat better acquainted with Thailand. Then went on to Cambodia and spent, I think, just twenty-four hours in Cambodia. Then to Vietnam for a week or so, then on to Hong Kong where I had never been before. Then my only visit to Taiwan occurred then, and I wound up in Japan. So I saw several of the countries. I guess it was a—I can't remember, three or five weeks' visit.

LC: That's quite a tour.

JM: Yes, it was. It was an eye-opener.

LC: Oh, I'm sure.

JM: It was very good and useful for me.

LC: Tell me a little bit about your time in Rangoon.

JM: I stayed I think it was at the Strand Hotel, which was then the principal hotel in Rangoon. It was an old British colonial-style hotel with no air conditioning in the tropics but did have overhead fans with mosquito netting. Both those things were new in my experience. I had never been in the tropics before.

LC: Right.

JM: Since I had three small children, I was a bit worried, never having had tropical experience, about malaria and other things. I remember also that one of the consuls general I had in Istanbul my first post, Mr. Macy, who had spent nine years in Karachi, said, "Never sleep under an overhead fan without a belly band." That's just the way he put it. So I remember that I was worried about this fan blowing on me all night in bed. I didn't exactly have a belly band, but if I turned the fan off, I couldn't possibly sleep, it was—the heat was so intense. But if the fan was on, I worried about it. The things one worries about before actually having an experience in a given area. So I remember that. I also remember that the streets and sidewalks in Rangoon were already very dilapidated. Big holes in the sidewalk, you had to be careful so you didn't fall into something. So the country was already deteriorating in an economic sense even though it hadn't had its independence for—let's see. They would have had independence I guess for about nine years. So that's why I think it got its independence in '48. So things were deteriorating considerably already in an economic sense in that country. I unfortunately did not get outside Rangoon, except to the Shwedagon Pagoda, which you may be acquainted with, for a visit. I do remember talking well with Dick Usher, the head of the Economic Unit and also the head of the Political Unit. Let me think of his name. He was a very good officer. He's married to an Anglo-Burmese lady whom I think he married while he was there. I have lots of subsequent experience with him, including the fact that he was a fellow inspector later when I was one.

LC: His name will come to you.

JM: He's a man I thought he should have become an ambassador, because I thought he was a very able individual.

LC: His name will come to you, no doubt.

JM: Right.

LC: After that visit, you mentioned that you went to Thailand for the meeting. I'll ask you a little bit more about the meeting in a bit or perhaps in our next session.

JM: Yes.

LC: You did go on to Vietnam?

JM: Yes, I did.

LC: If I'm right, did you meet the president of South Vietnam?

JM: Oh, yes. Very briefly, I did. Yes.

LC: Can you tell me about that, Joe?

JM: Well, while I was in Vietnam, I went up to Hue in Central Vietnam, where we had recently opened a consulate. I stayed one or two nights there. While I was there, President Diem, who originated from Hue, came up on a visit. So I stood in line with our consul to receive President Diem, together, of course, with a lot of Vietnamese officials when his airplane landed there. Now that was all I did. I think I shook his hand. That was the only contact I had with him at that point. I had many more later when I was stationed in Vietnam, but that was my initial acquaintance personally with Diem.

LC: Now how big was his retinue that day? Do you remember?

JM: No, I don't, but I am sure it was substantial. I can remember even then the big signs posted in the ex-royal precincts of Hue, "May President Diem Live for Ten Thousand Years." I think this was an adaptation of what the Chinese emperors had used. I suppose the Vietnamese had also, and now they were applying it to President Diem.

LC: Was he wearing a little white suit?

JM: Oh, yes, I'm sure he was because that was the official attire, let's say the official formal attire in Vietnam. It's white sharkskin. Do you know what sharkskin is?

LC: I don't, actually.

JM: It's a very glossy material. So whenever there was any formal occasion in Vietnam, for example, when Vice President Johnson came and Diem gave a formal dinner for him, all the guests were in—and Diem, and I don't know that Johnson was or not—were in white sharkskin suits. When we presented, our diplomatic corps presented its New Year's greeting to Diem, we were all in white sharkskin suits. When Diem was

inaugurated to his second term as president, same thing. So that was the formal attire, white sharkskin. He probably arrived in Hue in that kind of a suit. I'm sure I was not in one. I hadn't bought one at that stage. I think I bought it in Hong Kong on the way to Vietnam when I was assigned there.

LC: That's what I was going to ask, whether you were properly attired. As you were traveling, I guess you got a pass. (Laughs)

JM: Right.

LC: Well, thank you, Joe. Let's take a break.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [9] of [57]
Date: October 22, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the twenty-second of October 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. The ambassador is joining me by telephone from your home in Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: I'd like to thank you again for agreeing to participate in the project. I want to make sure that you know how important that is to us, the time that you're investing. Joe, I want to begin this morning by asking you if you can give a rough characterization of your view of Britain's investments in Southeast Asia at the time that you were charged with dealing with Thai and Burmese economic affairs.

JM: Laura, I can't recall very much with respect to that particular question at all. Britain certainly had a historic colonial connection with Burma, but I don't recall during the time that I was dealing with Burma from late 1955 until early '58, that any particular British question arose with respect to Burma that—I don't have any recollection that Britain was playing a particularly important role there.

LC: Okay.

JM: Certainly with—well, Britain, of course, did play an extremely important role in Malaya, as we know, in the fight against the guerillas who were led by the communists. Britain won that battle, to its great credit.

LC: Yes, absolutely.

JM: But aside from Malaya, well, I suppose even a little later, I think Britain originally had control of Sarawak, if that's the way it's pronounced. I don't know whether Brunei or not. Wait, Brunei remained independent anyway. But Sarawak and Sabah, I think, were the two states in the island, part of the islands that eventually joined with Malaya to form Malaysia.

LC: Yes. These are the northern parts of Borneo, the island.

JM: That's right. So in Malaya and obviously in Singapore, the British had played an important role, although certainly the key figure from the mid-'50s on in Singapore was Lee Kuan Yew, and not Britain.

LC: Let me ask with regard for example to the U.S. loan to Burma that we talked about before.

JM: Yes.

LC: Was there any sense on the part of U.S. officials, maybe not yourself but perhaps others, that this may in some way open a new track to the officials in Rangoon who had very much, I think, turned their backs on Britain at this point? Was there a sense that this was a new opening to some of them?

JM: Well, that certainly I think was part of the hope that at least it would influence the Burmese away from switching their desired path toward the communists, to keep them at least neutral. I don't think we had any great hope of getting them as an ally, but we certainly didn't want them to move into the communist camp. It certainly wasn't an anti-British move in any way. The issue was fought out and finally approved as far as the loan was concerned. As I indicated last time, in the midst of our concern over a Soviet leadership visit to Burma, which we thought might influence them to tilt toward the communist camp. We hoped this loan agreement might help to at least preserve their neutrality. I might add, Laura, that I subsequently in my experience and dealings came to view this sort of financial carrot as much less significant than we thought in the '50s in terms of the political results that might be achieved by it. I became increasingly cynical that this would have—that such financial inducements would have any lasting effect politically.

LC: Were there any particular projects that were funded, or initiatives that were primarily economic that you though, "Hmm, this probably isn't going to fan out the way that it ought to." Or that in hindsight, you evaluated and thought, "Gee, we didn't really get our dollar's worth there."

JM: Well, I can't—excuse me, Laura. I can't really discuss intelligently the projects that were financed by the loan, because all that occurred long after my association with Burma. As I think I indicated, I believe it took a year or two even to negotiate the terms of the loan agreement with Burma before any projects could even be

considered. Even ten years later, the money had not been fully spent for projects. So the whole thing moved extremely slowly. I can't really discuss—I don't know what projects were eventually funded by it. We didn't have any specific projects in mind at the time of the loan agreement, as I recall.

LC: Were there any examples in Thailand of projects that were U.S.-funded that didn't, to your mind, have the intended political outcomes?

JM: No. As a matter of fact the principal project in Thailand, which I—the principal controversial project in Thailand, which I recall from that era of '55 to '58, was the construction of the Northeast Highway in Thailand from Bangkok toward Laos. At that time, it was considered important for internal Thai political reasons because the Vietnamese, there were forty thousand Vietnamese communists in northeast Thailand, and we felt they were communist-oriented. They had come from North Vietnam. We thought it was important to, among other things, to build this highway to increase the government's contact with and influence over—the Thai government's contact with and influence over the people in northeastern Thailand. As it turned out—excuse me. That project proved to have great worth in the future war in Southeast Asia because it was used extensively, among other things, to transport supplies to U.S. airbases in northeastern Thailand. So it has certainly more than well paid for itself. It proved to be extremely justified in the longer run.

LC: Do you have any idea what the U.S. investment was in that project?

JM: Oh, I can't recall now, Laura. No.

LC: It was a great deal though? Was it—?

JM: Yeah. I think it was our principal aid project in Thailand, in terms of cost at that time.

LC: Sure. Sure. Joe, let me ask also a broader question about Thailand and Thai politics and the relationship with the United States. Thailand had, of course, remained pseudo-independent, I guess, during World War II. That had emerged as a point of pride for Thailand in the postwar era. Was there any resistance on the part of Thai officials to coming under as it were the American nuclear umbrella, the American economic wing? Resistance that you met or heard about through cables?

JM: I don't recall any, Laura. I think we enjoyed good relations with the Thai government during that period. I don't recall if there was any particular opposition within Thailand to this decision of the Thai government—I should say governments because they did change. There was—oh, there was a coup at some point in 1958, which threw out the existing prime minister and brought in, I remember, Marshal Sarit as the head man. I happened to be involved in that one on the margin because I think that particular weekend, the Thai desk officer in the State Department was away. I was assigned his function in addition to my function as the Vietnam desk officer for that weekend. So I did get a bit involved in that coup. In Washington's reaction to that coup, because it was not a U.S.-mounted coup in any sense whatsoever.

LC: Sure.

JM: But we decided, I think, rather quickly to switch our support. We had strongly supported the previous government, which was pro-U.S., to Sarit, whom we had, I think, to a small degree our fingers crossed initially, but we switched. Since he had taken over, we switched our support to him and never as, I recall, had any major problems with him at all on the contrary.

LC: Can you tell me anything about the events of that weekend? For example, you being called in to manage probably a flow of cables from Bangkok?

JM: Well, Laura, I'm not sure I can remember a great deal. I can remember that Walter Robertson, who was the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, then called Far Eastern Affairs, called in the Thai ambassador, I think, while this coup was in progress. I can't—I remember that I was asked to prepare the briefing paper for the assistant secretary for this particular meeting. I can't recall very much about the substance of that paper at all. I do recall that that was the first time that I ever met Thanat Khoman, who was the Thai ambassador in Washington and subsequently in the mid-'60s became the foreign minister. I did subsequently have some contact with him in 1965, which I can discuss when we get to that particular contact.

LC: Okay. I'll make a note, Joe, that we'll come back to that.

JM: Yeah. I believe that since the coup was in progress, we were expressing—and we had had such good relations with the man who was being prime minister and the man against whom the coup was mounted, that we were expressing some apprehension.

But I don't think we raised this issue strongly because my feeling is, and I don't think this has always been the position of the U.S. government, that when a coup is being mounted by a pro-U.S. man against another pro-U.S. man, your best position—the best U.S. position in most cases is to remain neutral. Because they are both pro-U.S., and you'd better wait and see who comes out on top, since we usually don't have enough influence to determine the outcome of such a coup.

LC: Sure.

JM: But not everybody would agree with that.

LC: No, that's right. You get to be controversial.

JM: I took this position at a crucial juncture in Vietnam, which we can also discuss at some point.

LC: What year would that have been, Joe?

JM: That would have been 1960 coup in Vietnam. Coup attempt, I should say. It was not a successful one.

LC: I will in due course come to that.

JM: Okay.

LC: I have now several notes about things I must ask you.

JM: Incidentally while we're on this, I'll just add a footnote to what I said.

LC: Sure.

JM: Before you and I started the formal part of this conversation, we discussed the book by Marshall Green.

LC: Yes.

JM: When Marshall Green was the chargé in Korea in 1960, I think was the year, when General—I'm not sure I can remember all these—General Park mounted his coup d'etat against Syngman Rhee. You may remember that, too. Marshall as chargé urged strongly that Park desist and let Syngman Rhee remain in power because he was the legitimate government. Park, of course, resented it at the time, but subsequently and Marshall points this out in one of his books, subsequently after Park had taken over, he told Green, he said, "I now approve of what you did because I'm in power now. I want you to support me in case there's any attempt by somebody else to mount a coup d'etat against me."

LC: Yes. Coups can be a complicated business.

JM: Yeah. Right. I'm not sure I ever agreed with Marshall's decision on that one, but I have a lot of respect for him. But there are differences, even among those who are involved in these affairs.

LC: Joe, let me ask about how it came to pass that you transitioned to your next assignment within the State Department, which again I think kept you in Washington, but a new assignment.

JM: Yeah. For quite some time before I actually was assigned to the Vietnam desk, I was told by the director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs that he wanted me to take over the desk at a point in the future when certain chairs were being switched, and I'll tell you what I mean by that. It depended upon the departure of the Laos desk officer who was slated to leave because her term in Washington was completed in 1958. The director was Ken Young at that time was proposing to move Tom Corcoran, who was the Vietnam desk officer over to the Laos desk and put me in the Vietnam desk. He said—I think he had been sufficiently—I don't want to blow my horn, but I think he had been sufficiently impressed with my economic work on Burma and Thailand that he considered me an apt candidate for the Vietnam desk, even though I had not had any experience in that area. The only prior experience I did have was, I think I told you last week, was a week's visit in October '57, which was based on the fact that I was slated to take over the desk eventually.

LC: Yes. Okay.

JM: So that's the chain of circumstances under which I became desk—oh, and the director also, Ken Young also told me, he said, "Your four years in Washington will be up in the summer of '59, when the position of political counselor, chief of political section at the embassy in Saigon, his term is up. I would like you to take that job when your four years are up in the summer of '59, provided the ambassador, our ambassador in Saigon concurs." So he had—this was a lot of forward personnel planning on his part, which led me to switch to the Vietnam desk, which I—about which I never had any regrets.

LC: Joe, how common was this degree of sort of fore modeling the next two assignments in the Foreign Service? Did that ever happen to you again?

JM: I suppose the answer is partly yes, to a degree. Laura, it happens in some cases, and it doesn't happen in others. Circumstances can be so different. Not just with respect to an individual, but with respect to the circumstances surrounding any particular job that might open in the future. So I think the State Department—I shouldn't say the State Department as an institution, of course, doesn't make any plans. But it depends upon the people who are working both in the personnel section of the State Department and the substantive people, because they have to work together to work these things out. I think it depends very much upon the individuals who are involved, particularly in the substantive area. I think some plan forward moves for personnel whom they consider good, while others may consider this a low priority and give it a little attention. So I think it depends very much upon individuals.

LC: So did Ken Young take this same activist approach with other people? I mean, it seems like he may have with regard to Tom Corcoran, for example.

JM: Yeah. I think Ken did. Ken was an extremely active director of the Office of Southeast Asia, both substantively and with respect to personnel. I think we got his finger involved in almost everything that occurred in that area as director.

LC: Joe, can you tell me about the woman who was on the Laos desk, probably was '56 to '58? Who was that? Do you know?

JM: Yes, it was Patricia Byrne.

LC: What, if anything, can you tell me about her background or career?

JM: Well, Pat had served—I believe, I'm sure of this—the embassy in Saigon before she came back to Washington. She was assigned to the Laos desk for, oh, I believe at least three years. She subsequently had a quite distinguished career. Pat was ambassador, I believe, to Burma and also I think to at least one other country. Pat is still alive and kicking. I see her name in the monthly bulletin I get from the Retired Officer's Association. So she said she's still well and thriving. Quite evidently, she's quite active in the Association of Retired Officers, even today.

LC: Wow. Terrific. Terrific. Let me ask you a little bit, just while we're speaking about him, about Tom Corcoran. He would have been then your opposite number on the Laos desk? Is that accurate?

JM: Exactly.

LC: Okay. Can you give a sort of profile of him?

JM: Oh, yes. I'd be glad to. Tom, obviously from his name, was an Irishman who I think had more self-control—as much self-control as I've ever seen in any individual in my life. Tom was rather stout. He was a bachelor. He was the consul in Hanoi in 1954, at the time the communists took over control of Hanoi. He remained there, I think, for about nine months subject to their harassments, and went through that period with swimming colors. I think he was the ideal person for that. I believe in 1975, when the communists took over control in Laos completely, I think he was the chargé there. Tom was the ideal person for both of those assignments at this crisis juncture because I think he could withstand pressure as well as anybody I've ever seen. I'll give you another example of Tom on the Laos desk. We had a pretty excitable ambassador in Laos from 1957 to '59. I think his name was Smith. At one point, we were pressing the Lao government to devalue its currency because our aid program was being, in a sense, held up by the low exchange rate that the Lao government was trying to maintain for its currency. I remember at one point, Tom had eleven NIACT telegrams on this question from our ambassador in Laos. NIACT means night action. We asked for night action from Washington. Tom hadn't responded to any of these over the period of a few days. Finally he drafted a forward reply and referenced all eleven telegrams. Now that's how unexcitable Tom could be in a period of crisis. He was the antithesis of the ambassador that we then had in Laos.

LC: Well, perhaps that balance was a good thing.

JM: Yeah. Tom subsequently became an ambassador to either Rwanda or Burundi. I've forgotten which. I always had a very high regard for him. Even though I know Pat Byrne sort of resented the fact that Tom was switched from the Vietnam desk to the Laos desk. She thought that was unfair to Tom for me to be replacing him since I had no experience in Southeast Asia, but I never heard a word of that sort from Tom. He and I remained friends over all the years until he died a few years ago.

LC: He sounds like he was the right man at the right place in many circumstances.

JM: Oh, he certainly was. I have a high regard for him, a great respect and high regard for Tom.

LC: Joe, you mentioned and we discussed last time your brief stay in Vietnam in 1957, and that that was preparatory, in fact, to your moving to the Vietnam desk.

JM: Right.

LC: What, if you can in general terms, what was the purview of the position that you were taking up? What matters would come before you as the Vietnam desk officer?

JM: As chief of the political section?

LC: Yes.

JM: Laura, why don't we get to that when I start talking about my assignment to Saigon? You're talking about the purview when I was in Saigon or when I was in Washington?

LC: Well, when you're in Washington. I'd like to talk about what happened on that.

JM: Oh, when I was in Washington. Well, a desk officer—or using the official term, officer in charge of Vietnam affairs—a desk officer is responsible for following all questions related to U.S. affairs in that particular country. In the case of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, that included even economic affairs. With many desk officers at that time in Washington—I don't know how it is today—did not have the primary responsibility for economic affairs because each office also had an economic unit, which handled the economic affairs. But for some reason, the Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos desk officers also handled their own economic affairs. So we—the Vietnam desk officer dealt with all questions, all aspects of our relations with Vietnam. He was the primary person responsible for initiating action or initiating responses to messages from the embassy in Saigon.

LC: Can you give me an overview, Joe, of what the state of play was between the United States and Vietnam when you took over the position?

JM: Yes. Laura, the one issue that I will start to discuss right now in response to your question is that even by late 1957, we were beginning to become concerned about the rising non-communist opposition to President Diem. That began to manifest itself in '57. One of the questions Ken Young asked me to look into as I went out to Vietnam on this trip, was this particular one, "How significant is this? Does it really begin to become an important issue as far as Diem is concerned?" When I got to Saigon, I found that the

political section was getting together a dispatch on all aspects of this issue. The head of the section, Tom Bowie, was a little nervous about this because he knew that our ambassador, Elbridge Durbrow, was a very firm supporter of Diem. He didn't want to raise these questions of non-communist dissent from the way Diem was handling the situation in the government in Vietnam, didn't want to arouse the really serious temper that Durbrow had. So he was a little nervous about this when he showed me the draft of the dispatch which they were working on, the political section. What it did was outline, simply outlined the facts that had come to the embassy's attention on this issue. The dispatch did eventually arrive back in Washington after I returned there. But this was the beginning of U.S. interest in what later proved to be a very serious problem in Vietnam, of course, the beginning of non-communist dissent as far as Diem was concerned. Again, I'll go into this more when I get to Vietnam because by the time I got to Vietnam in '59, it was becoming an increasingly serious question.

LC: Can you just preview a little bit as to where the locus of the non-communist now opposition was? Was this regional?

JM: Well, it was primarily among the educated class. Diem was running a very tightly-controlled autocratic government. A lot of the educated or what the French call the intellectuals felt that they should play somewhat of an increasing role in this. They weren't being permitted to play any role because Diem and his brother Nhu were controlling all aspects of the political situation. So it's primarily in that class that the dissent was arising.

LC: What about the position of the—

JM: Laura?

LC: Yes. Can you hear me, Joe?

JM: Now I can hear you. Yes.

LC: Okay. Let me ask a little bit about the appreciation within—

JM: Laura, again I can't hear you.

LC: I'm sorry. How's this, Joe?

JM: Oh, now. The telephone's slipped from my ear.

LC: Oh, okay. Okay. How are we now?

JM: No. It's fine now.

LC: Okay. I want to ask about the embassy's appreciation of the communist threat at this point in 1958, early 1958.

JM: Well, this was late '57 when I made this statement. Well, even on that issue, by '57—we're going to get into this one at great length later—even by '57, communist terrorist activities had begun to develop in the Mekong Delta area. Not in central Vietnam, but in the Mekong Delta area. That is assassinations of village chiefs, of schoolteachers, incidents in remote villages when communists would take over control for brief length and conduct propaganda lectures, and obviously attempting to recruit rural people through their support. So even by '57, this was beginning to emerge as a problem. Both the non-communist dissent and the communist insurgency began to manifest themselves in 1957.

LC: Now the U.S. placement in programs in Vietnam at this time, late '57 and then into '58 were primarily what? I'm talking here not about military programs yet, but I'm talking about economic support for the Diem government. Can you give an outline of what the United States was doing with the programs there?

JM: Yes. We had an extensive economic aid program. Among other things were the support of the nine hundred thousand refugees who had come down from North Vietnam in 1954 at the time of the conclusion of the Geneva accords on the division of Vietnam between the communist North and the free South. Also with many projects in the economic sector, among other things the construction of two highways in central Vietnam from the coast into the interior highlands. When I say highways, I don't mean—neither was being paved, but they were being constructed with hopefully on an all-weather non-paved basis to enable increasing access, easier access to the Central Highlands. There were economic programs in many fields including support of the big import program to counter inflationary developments and to try to ensure that there was no waning of political support of Diem for economic reasons because we were still a hundred percent in support of Diem at that juncture.

LC: Sure. Can you give us a similar sort of sketch of American military programs at this point?

JM: Yeah. Now, Laura, we also had an extensive military assistance program. Now let me just back up on that one.

LC: Okay.

JM: Let me reserve both these issues for just a moment until I—Laura, I want to back up to a bit of the history of Vietnam before I took over just to make sure that these problems are seen in context.

LC: That would be great. That would be wonderful.

JM: It will be remembered that right after World War II, the French wanted to get back into Vietnam to reassert their control over that country. The Vietnamese communists under Ho Chi Minh began to resist this by 1946. That war, between the Vietnamese communists, known then as the Viet Minh, and the French lasted for seven years. For eight years, I should say, from ’46 to ’54. For the French, also for political reasons began ostensibly to relinquish their control over Vietnam, political control over Vietnam to non-communists who wanted independence in 1949. Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos became nominally independent. Well, it’s more than nominal, but it wasn’t complete independence. So that there was no real satisfaction on the part of the Vietnamese. The French retained so much control, but I think we established embassies in those countries, certainly in Saigon. I know by ’54 we had an embassy, and we must have had one considerably earlier. Just at what point I’m not sure we put an embassy there. But we didn’t extend military assistance to the French in their fight against the Viet Minh until the Korean War broke out. Then we became very—the Truman administration became extremely concerned over the whole range of communist threats in Eastern Asia. Not only in Korea, but that is the time when you will recall that we sent our fleet into the seas between Taiwan and the mainland to ensure that the—to try to ward of any Chinese communist attack against Taiwan. That’s when we initiated military assistance to the French in their fight against the communists in Vietnam. That was under Truman in 1950. That program gradually expanded over the succeeding four years. Then unfortunately, as far as the French were concerned, the communist fight against the French gradually assumed greater proportions in those years. Then we had the final great climactic fight at Dien Bien Phu, climactic in a political sense. Not really all that important in a military sense, but it was politically important because by 19—this was in 1954. By that time, the French political will to continue the military fight in

Vietnam had pretty well collapsed. Similar thing, as you know, occurred in the United States in the late ’60s and ’70s in our Vietnam War. Some parallels there.

LC: Yes.

JM: So that the French by 1954, unless they got outright military intervention on our part in support of their battle at Dien Bien Phu, would resolve to throw up their hands. A French government—the existing French government collapsed. Mendes France took over as the premier in France, and initiated a process, which moved toward the Geneva Conference on Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in 1954. That conference, which we first started to participate in fully—there were quite a number of countries, which took part in that conference.

LC: Yes.

JM: France—I’m not sure I can mention all of them. France, the UK, the U.S., Russia, Communist China, and obviously the Viet Minh and the non-communist government in Saigon, the one which had never been fully acquired independence, but which by now recognized by the U.S. and many other countries.

LC: The Associated States governments.

JM: That’s right. You’ve got the right term. This conference in Geneva occurred in the summer of 1954. It soon became clear that all the French really wanted to do was pull out. The Eisenhower administration with Mr. Dulles as the Secretary of State did not want to be directly associated with the fall of any territory—new territory under communist political control, recognized political control. After all they had seen what had happened to the Democrats when the communists took over China. They did not want to be tarred with the loss of Vietnam. So it was clear that the French were heading toward an agreement which would divide Vietnam into the communist North and the free South, and that North Vietnam would then become a political entity of its own under communist control. So the Eisenhower administration reduced its participation in the Geneva conference. Mr. Dulles no longer was involved. I think it was the number two man in the State Department who assumed observer status rather than direct participation. Their agreements were reached primarily between—well, not primarily—agreements between the French and the Viet Minh. The agreements that were concluded there are from a legal—in a legal sense, one of the most anomalous set, I think, in diplomatic history,

because the only agreement that was signed, as I recall, was the armistice agreement between the French and the Viet Minh. There was a subsequent agreement, and that agreement temporarily divided Vietnam into the communist North and the free South, allowed for anybody in either area who wanted to move to the area to do so within a ninety-day period. Nine hundred thousand North Vietnamese left to go south in one of the most—at that time, I think the most massive refugee movement that ever occurred in history. Ninety thousand South Vietnamese opted to go north, to the communist area. That was—I think those were all part terms in the armistice agreement, which was signed. Then another important agreement was the one which said elections would be held for the reunification of Vietnam in 1956, two years later, under UN auspices. That agreement was not signed by anybody. So from a legal sense, it was scarcely a legally recognized agreement. All the United States did with respect to these agreements was to issue a unilateral statement stating that we would not use force to upset any of these agreements. Now what actually happened—and during this, the Geneva conference, the United States decided to support a man who had been—who was a non-communist South Vietnamese, but who had been in exile because of his opposition to the continuation of a lot of French control, as far as the new Vietnamese state was concerned, to support him as the new prime minister. That was Ngo Dinh Diem. He was then in exile in New Jersey. Diem did take over the government at that point with the United States' support. A few months after he took over, he decided that he wanted the French, the remaining French military in South Vietnam withdrawn. He wanted to look to the United States for military assistance. Now under the armistice provisions that had been signed by the French and the Viet Minh, no new [foreign] military troops could be introduced into either halves—foreign military troops could be introduced into either half of Vietnam. The strength of any foreign units were there had to be maintained at the existing figure. Well, we already had at the time of the conclusion of those agreements, some three to four hundred U.S. military in South Vietnam, administering our assistance agreements with the French. So we were legally permitted to retain that number in South Vietnam. We maintained that number for quite a number of years subsequently, because we did try to adhere to the provisions of the agreement. We did have three or four hundred other temporary military personnel in Vietnam to recover the equipment that we had furnished

to the French. They did continue there for several years. So the total American military in Vietnam during the entire Eisenhower administration, was between eight hundred and nine hundred. This was also an important issue later in the Vietnam War because of the question of who had violated the Geneva agreements first, of course. As far as the election provisions were concerned, Ngo Dinh Diem, who had not signed anything at Geneva, decided in 1956 that the elections should not be held in South Vietnam because the preponderance of population in Vietnam was in communist-controlled North Vietnam. He knew and knew quite correctly, that no communist regime had ever conducted a free election. So if elections were held in both the North and the South in '56 on the question of reunification of Vietnam, obviously the communist view in the North would prevail because the great majority of the populations were in that zone. Again, this became an issue later during our war in Vietnam that we had not carried out the elections. Because we issued a statement of support of Diem's position. We had only committed ourselves earlier, as you recall, to avoid the use of force to upset those agreements. We did not use force. We simply issued a statement in support of Diem's position. If one compares the situation in divided Vietnam with the other divided countries in the world, Germany and Korea, where the preponderance of the population was in the free areas, West Germany and South Korea, and therefore the communist areas, North Korea and East Germany, always refused to agree to free elections because they knew just as Diem knew that with the preponderance of population in the free half, that the reunification would prevail. Yet the American opposition to the Vietnam War never considered those examples when it looked at the position which Diem, with our subsequent declaration of support, took in South Vietnam. In other words, this was an attempt—this was obviously an application of a double standard, as far as the American opponents to the Vietnam War were concerned. I feel very strongly on that score.

LC: Would you say that the United States was fairly clear in 1954, at the time that reunification elections were first put into the mix as to what would happen in Vietnam, that the United States was fairly clear that those elections would not take place, even as early as 1954?

JM: Well, Laura, I suppose the answer to that would be yes and no. In view of what I just said about the facts with respect to the demographic distribution, I think

looking at that we, I think, felt that they shouldn't take place. Whether they would or would not take place in South Vietnam depended in '54 on, I think, on how well Diem took hold in South Vietnam. If South Vietnam was split up among many different political contenders, then who knows what could have happened. But if Diem did manage to consolidate his power, and he did not have any particular power base at the time he became the prime minister, but he did succeed in the ensuing two years, in consolidating his power in this way. His first big battle occurred in December of '54 with the so-called Binh Xuyen. The Binh Xuyen were the French-officered corrupt police force trying to maintain an independent position in Vietnam. Corrupt, out just for their own good. But Diem succeeded in crushing the Binh Xuyen as a force. He did it with his own military, crushed them, and eliminated that as a source of opposition. He had two subsequent contenders. The Cao Dai, a semi-religious, semi-political sect in the province of Tay Ninh, over toward the Cambodian border, he succeeded in negotiating with them to bring them under the control of the central government rather than as a force seeking to operate independently. The third force he had to deal with was another group called the Hoa Hao, which was strong in a province or two down along the Mekong River. There was a military battle between Diem's government forces and the Hoa Hao, in which the Diem government forces were led by General "Big" Minh, which defeated the Hoa Hao and succeeded in capturing their leader, Ba Cut. Diem, Diem's government proceeded against our opposition to execute Ba Cut. That we disagreed with. But the Hoa Hao were brought, were eliminated from then on as an independent force, in a force trying to operate independently of the government in South Vietnam. So these three political or political-military battles were between '54 and '56 were all won by Diem, which helped to consolidate his power in the free south. There was one other political battle, which he fought in 1955. The emperor Bao Dai was still nominally the head of state in Vietnam. In 1955, Diem initiated a referendum as to whether Bao Dai should be retained—the emperor system should be retained as the head of state, and overwhelmingly won that election. So although Bao Dai was not a significant figure in any political sense at that point, as a figurehead even he was eliminated. So Diem, by the end of '56 had quite well consolidated his position in South Vietnam, certainly by the time he issued that statement with respect to the elections provisions of the Geneva

Accords that he would not go through with them for the reasons I have indicated. His position was quite solid by then.

LC: He had actually as you've said, Joe, held a nationwide referendum on the monarchy. That demonstrated his willingness at least in one instance to utilize elections.

JM: Right.

LC: And to utilize that tool, although he knew, I think, that it would probably come—the result would come down in his favor.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, let me ask a little bit too about Diem's background. You mentioned that he was staying in New Jersey at the time of the Geneva conference and I think for some time before that.

JM: That's right.

LC: He was obviously a convert to Catholicism. I don't know if he—

JM: Well, he wasn't just—he came from a Catholic family.

LC: Yes. That's right.

JM: He was not a—

LC: Well, the entire family. You're right, Joe. I'm sorry. Catholic background.

JM: I might—since you raise the question, Laura, I can give you a thumbnail sketch of that family if you'd like it.

LC: Yes. I think that would be very, very helpful. Yes, sir.

JM: The Ngo family, N-G-O, was a very prominent central Vietnamese mandarin family. His father had been quite active as a prominent Vietnamese educated intellectual, taking part in politics and was as I recall actually killed by the communists. It was a Catholic family, very prominent family in Central Vietnam. His father was killed for political reasons by the communists. Diem was the senior member of the family left after the father's death. I think there were nine children, I believe. His brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who always operated very closely politically with Diem, a Catholic archbishop, I think he was. Ngo Dinh Thuc was the archbishop in Central Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Can, C-A-N, a very reclusive individual who was very active as sort of an underground political operator, or I should say, a concealed political operator in central Vietnam. Another brother became the Vietnamese government's ambassador in Great Britain. There were

several other members of that family as well. So it was an extremely prominent family. They were quite not only anti-communist, they were also anti-French. They wanted real Vietnamese control of Vietnam, not nominal control under the overall supervision of the French. That was the reason that Diem was forced into exile, I think around 1951, and eventually wound up in New Jersey as a resident in a, I believe it was a Catholic seminary.

LC: Yes. I think was the Maryknoll Seminary.

JM: That's right, Maryknoll.

LC: Do you know any more about how he came to be invited to the seminary or to the United States?

JM: No. I don't really, Laura. If I did, I don't recall now.

LC: Okay. But he certainly did live in the U.S. for quite a while.

JM: Yeah. He lived I think for two or three years in the U.S.

LC: Okay. Were there daughters as well in the family? Do you know?

JM: Yes. There was a daughter. Laura, I have a remarkable picture of that entire family dressed in mandarinal costume with the old eighty-nine-year-old mother in the center of it. I think it was a picture taken by the U.S. Information Service. I consider that a very historic picture. The family looks very impressive. I think Madame Nhu is all—you know, who had become the very controversial—who as Nhu's wife became extremely controversial later, is also in the picture. So I value that as a treasure in my Vietnam experience.

LC: Yes. I would think so. In fact, Tom Barnes, who I know you know, told me that he at one time met the mother.

JM: Oh, yeah. Well, Tom was subsequently consul in place. So he did meet the mother? Oh, really?

LC: It was a very interesting story. Yes. This family, of course, takes on huge proportions with regard to U.S. policies.

JM: Let me ask you, Laura. Did Tom ever indicate that he met Ngo Dinh Can, C-A-N?

LC: I don't believe that he did. I think—

JM: No. I'm not sure he would have.

LC: I don't think he did. I think he did tell me about meeting the archbishop. But I think he said he believed he was in the same place as Can one day, but wasn't aware—they weren't mutually identified to each other. I think it was something like that.

JM: Tom's predecessor as consul in Hue is also a very good friend of mine, Bob Barber, who though is now retired, he still serves as a Foreign Service inspector from time to time and is at the moment, I think, in Iraq.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: Yeah. We're very close friends with him and his wife. I don't know whether Bob ever—I have a feeling Bob may once have met Ngo Dinh Can, I'm not sure.

LC: Now Can's position, can you just sketch that out, because he is such a difficult figure to sort of get hold of? His relationship to the Ngo family's sources of power and control, can you talk about that?

JM: Can's position, you say?

LC: Yes.

JM: Well, he—subsequently, oh, I got this around '58, '59, that period, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was the chief political operator under Diem and his biggest ally, of course, established the Can Lao Party, which modeled itself to some degree on the Kuomintang in China. Operated as a more or less secret party. Can was the man who operated on the family's behalf in Central Vietnam in support of the Can Lao Party. There were many, many rumors and reports about Can. As you can see, there was no real American contact with him because of his reclusiveness. Whether his role was as significant in central Vietnam's history during that crucial period, I don't think anybody can say precisely because the information gotten was often so contradictory and exaggerated. It was a bit like this issue. I remember during the time I was in Vietnam, I used to get a tremendous number of reports passing over my desk about the immense wealth that had been accumulated by Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife and transferred abroad. I think subsequent developments indicated there was very little if anything to that at all. Whatever money they had abroad was a quite modest figure. This was another example of my experience where information flowing to an intelligence agency and disseminated by it with attempt to evaluate it could be extremely misleading. The same thing was true of Ngo Dinh Can's political influence in central Vietnam. I don't think any of us will ever really know

how significant it really was. Maybe an academic researcher can find out today, but I'd be a little dubious.

LC: Yes, because the sources would all be so much in question. It's almost like doing in the olden days, Kremlinology, when you had so very, very little to work with. Now, of course, we are having the archives opened and that makes everything look different, as you know.

JM: Laura, I might just add at this point a matter of some personal interest. During the period we were in Saigon, from 1959 to 1962, I began to become increasingly acquainted with—make sure I get the name? Nguyen Van Buu, also a central Vietnam figure.

LC: Nguyen Van Buu?

JM: Nguyen Van Buu. Nguyen, the Vietnamese name—the very common Vietnamese surname, N-G-U-Y-E-N. Then V-A-N, and his last name was B-U-U. Actually, that's his—the third in succession, that was really his given name. I became increasingly acquainted with him. Bob Barber, when he was consul in Hue from '57 to '59, had become acquainted with Buu. I don't know whether it was he who passed on this relationship or not. Anyway, Buu, I think, also liked his contact with the political counselor. We had rather close personal relations in a social sense. One of the—one example, which I'm going to cite here because I may forget it later.

LC: Okay.

JM: In I guess this was in early '62. Among my wife's activities in Vietnam was working with Vietnamese charitable organizations. Somehow she got involved in the charitable activities of the chief of the Vietnamese Labor Federation, which was headed by Tran Quoc Buu. Despite the fact both had the names Buu, they were completely unrelated, of course, since those were given names. She visited among other places with Tran Quoc Buu a slum area in Saigon where the people were living in houses built over a marsh or swamp. They had to walk on planks between the houses. Many of them were rotten. People including children were falling through into the muck below. So my wife suggested to Tran Quoc Buu, "Why don't you get Nguyen Van Buu, who is known to have a considerable amount of money, to donate some lumber to repair these things?" Tran Quoc Buu said, "Oh, no. I couldn't contact him personally." He said, "Could you

do it?" So my wife served as the intermediary between these two Vietnamese figures and managed to get a nice truckload of lumber to help repair the walkways between these houses.

LC: No kidding.

JM: So that was a very interesting aspect of the Vietnamese personality, how Tran Quoc Buu, with whom we also became very close, could not deal directly—I suppose maybe because of possible loss of face if he were turned down—directly with Nguyen Van Buu. Interesting, isn't it how Asians, at least Vietnamese operate in personal relationships with each other?

LC: Yes. It's very interesting. The fact that your wife had the chops to say, "Why don't you get this handled?" and then was put in the position of handling in it in a sense herself was pretty impressive.

JM: Yes.

LC: Now, tell me a little bit about Nguyen Van Buu, just while we're talking about him. What was his background?

JM: I believe he was a businessman of some sort in central Vietnam. He was generally considered the man who handled the finances of the Ngo family. He obviously had made a fair amount of money himself, though exactly how I don't know. But I'll give you another example of our relations with him. When we were leaving Vietnam in 1962, Nguyen Van Buu showed up at our house one day and told my wife he wanted to give a farewell dinner for us. He said, "Will you give me a guest list?" So my wife gave him I think eight or ten names, which a dozen was the normal size of a dinner of that sort. He came back to my wife and said, "Oh, no. Give me a lot more than that." So she gave him some additional names. Then we learned that he had sent out seven hundred invitations to this dinner, and four hundred people showed up. Now, the dinner was held in a suburb of Saigon, in Gia Dinh with these four hundred people eating in the garden of the residence of Nguyen Van Buu. At that point, Madame Nhu had put an edict through, "No public dancing because of the war in Vietnam." No dancing, period. I say public. No dancing. So what Buu, Nguyen Van Buu ,did even though he was very close to the Ngo family, what he did after dinner was have all the curtains drawn in the house and we danced for hours, this big group of people. We were rather embarrassed with this totally

unexpected lavish display on his part. An earlier instance of the extent of his influence, he invited our entire family one Sunday to come on his boat in the Saigon River for a Sunday lunch. I was rather reluctant to take the family because there had been terrorist incidents, including assassinations on the river. But he said, "Don't worry about that. My private militia will ensure that we're protected." So we went for the lunch. We had I think an entire barbequed animal. I think it was a lamb, which was unusual in Vietnam. Then after the lunch, he provided beds with pillows for all of us to take our siestas on. So we had a marvelous time, the entire family that day with him. Now that was just a small group of people. That was not a big on like the bash I described later. So we had some interesting relationships with this fellow in several respects.

LC: The last party that you talked about out on the river with the private militia guarding you and everything, that was still in '62 then?

JM: That I think, I don't know whether '62. It could have been '60. That one was probably fall of '61, I think.

LC: Really?

JM: Yeah.

LC: Well, Joe, let's take a break there.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [10] of [57]
Date: October 29, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the twenty-ninth of October 2004. I am in the interview room of the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. The ambassador speaking with me by telephone from Nevada. Good morning again, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, if you'd like, could you just resume our discussion of last week by giving me a sense of the general thrust of U.S. policy towards Vietnam, just the importance that Vietnam had in American foreign policy in Asia when you took over the desk at the State Department in '58.

JM: At that time, Vietnam wasn't an important area of interest as far as the U.S. government was concerned. It certainly wasn't the major area of interest, which it became in the '60s. But the Eisenhower administration had, as a result of its decision to back Ngo Dinh Diem as the leader in South Vietnam, consistently furnished both economic and military material and advisory assistance to him during the period from late '54 on after Diem decided to replace the French in the military assistance field with the Americans. So it was important, although not as important as it became later. Laura, the last time that we talked, you asked me the degree to which interest was developing in communist terrorist insurgency in Vietnam. As I indicated, it began in 1957 with terrorist incidents in the countryside, propaganda lectures of villagers and assassinations of village chiefs, schoolteachers, and other leaders in that area. It had already become sufficiently serious by early 1958 that the Vietnamese government under Diem proposed to set up, to help deal with this problem, an organization called the Civil Guard. This is in a way not an anomalous type of paramilitary force, semi-military, semi-police, which does not really exist in the United States but which was obviously was taken from the French model of the *Gendarmerie*, a kind of institution which also exists in a country like Italy with the *Carabinieri*, and in Spain with the *Garde Civile*. So it's well known in Europe, but not well known in the U.S. Now I emphasize that, because after Diem set this up, this

organization up, he turned to us for both advisory and material assistance to it. Unfortunately, he even asked for artillery and tanks, which immediately got American backs up, because this would mean that it would be scarcely distinguishable from the regular military. However, the embassy recommended to Washington that we furnish the proper kind of assistance to him, both in the material and advisory sense through the economic aid program under the predecessor of AID (Agency for International Development), which was then, I think, called the FOA, Foreign Operations Administration. I think that was it.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: Since that organization also furnished assistance to police outfits in certain countries it was aiding. So when the recommendation came in from the embassy, I as the desk officer immediately took this up for consideration and began to press AID to approve the kind of assistance, short, obviously, of tanks and artillery. Not that kind, but the regular kind of advisory and material assistance, which AID was furnishing to police forces. However, there was strong resistance, particularly at the very top in AID, saying that this was not a regular police force. It was different from the kind of organization in the police field that AID was aiding in other countries. They thought that it was not appropriate for AID to get into this area. Since it was paramilitary, it really belonged more in the field of the Defense Department. However, the Defense Department resisted totally getting involved because it was not a regular military organization. It was outside the level of forces in the AID recipient country, which had been approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. So I was sort of caught as the desk officer pushing this program, in the refusal of the Defense Department absolutely to become involved, and the resistance at the top of AID to also becoming involved because it was different from a regular police program. Finally, the head of AID said that if Secretary Dulles ordered him as the administrator of the AID program to become involved in this, he would do so. So I drafted a memorandum to that effect, which John Foster Dulles signed, and therefore AID did agree to become involved and to begin to furnish advisory and material assistance. However, as it turned out, this was not particularly effective because this was such a huge organization compared to a regular police department. As I've just indicated outside the realm of normal AID police assistance to foreign countries, that it was not

really very effective. So this program, though some assistance was furnished, it largely languished until Kennedy became president and ordered directly the Department of Defense to take over its support of the Civil Guard in Vietnam. That resolved the issue. From then on, the Civil Guard was regularly assisted by the Department of Defense just as the regular military forces in Vietnam were.

LC: Now, Joe, let me stop you there for a moment and ask you a little bit about what I understand the Foreign Operations Administration did do during this period, which is put out a contract to Michigan State University. Can you tell me what you know about that? For example, did you ever meet with Wesley Fishel?

JM: Oh, yeah. I knew Wes Fishel quite well.

LC: Tell me your impressions of him and anything you know about his background, Joe.

JM: Well, Wes, I think, was a faculty member of Michigan State University before he became involved in this program of assistance to Vietnam. Actually, I think there were two contracts, Laura, with which the FOA had with Michigan State University. One was in the public administration field and the assistance to Vietnam in that area, and the other was in the police field. Fishel arrived in Vietnam, I think, oh, early on after Diem became president. I believe about ’54 or ’55. I suspect—I can’t remember precisely, but I suspect Fishel knew Diem when Diem was in exile in the States when he was at the seminary in New Jersey. I suspect that because he became a rather close advisor of Diem after he arrived in Vietnam. So he was not involved just in the administration of these two contracts, which FOA had with Michigan State but also acted independently as an advisor to Diem.

LC: You said that you knew Fishel. What kind of a man was he?

JM: Well, he was a pretty gregarious individual, rather soft-spoken, easy to talk to and get along with. I think with a bit of steel in his fiber. He, I think sometimes in his associations with the AID mission in Vietnam, the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) mission tried to take advantage of his closeness to Diem to pressure that office to do some things they sometimes did not want to do. So relations were not always smooth between the head of the AID office in Vietnam and Fishel as a result of this.

LC: Can you talk a little bit, Joe, and again I would imagine some of this crossed your desk, but whether you remember it or not, about the scope of the Michigan State AID program to the Civil Guard and to the police in Saigon?

JM: Well, to the Civil Guard—the contract for the Michigan State University's involvement in the police program well preceded this question of assistance to the Civil Guard. That existed long before.

LC: Okay.

JM: I don't recall whether that contract was expanded in any way as a result of the decision to begin to assist the Civil Guard. I'm rather dubious that it did because I think this kind of support was also pretty well outside the scope of what Michigan State University could do in the police field. In other words, its expertise was in the area of assistance to regular police forces and not to a paramilitary organization.

LC: Do you know anything about the other police forces that MSU (Michigan State University) had a contract with? I believe there was some earlier interaction with police forces in Japan. Do you—

JM: I think there may have—I think there were, Laura, but I don't recall the specifics of that.

LC: Okay. Did Fishel come into the State Department to speak to you at any point?

JM: I don't recall that he did. He may have. I became well acquainted with him after I arrived in Vietnam in 1959 on assignment to the embassy there. But I don't recall when I had met him before. I could have, but I just don't remember.

LC: Okay. Joe, you mentioned the public administration contract that MSU had. Do you recall anything about the implementation of that contract?

JM: As I recall, that pertained primarily to an assistance to a special training institution set up by this new fledgling Vietnamese government in the area of public administration to train officials in various departments of administering the programs and the organization, the activities of various departments of the government. That's what I think it pertained to. I can't recall many details now about it.

LC: Was there a tension, do you think, between the idea of training a professional civil service and the kind of personalism of the Diem regime? Did you sense that at that time?

JM: No, because now this is special training institution of the Vietnamese government for administrators was set up before I got there. I don't recall any such tension, Laura. There could have been, but I don't remember any specific instances of it.

LC: Were there other universities, Joe, that—and I know this would have come across the FOA desk at least as much as yours, probably more often. But were there other universities that had similar training contracts in Vietnam during this period?

JM: Again, I don't recall any specific ones.

LC: Okay. I just wondered as an alumna of Michigan State University, whether they were truly special.

JM: They were certainly predominant in the field.

LC: Okay. Joe, I want to ask a little bit about what was going on in the diplomatic community in Washington while you were there on the Vietnam desk. I'm thinking particularly about relationships between the State Department officials with responsibility for Vietnam affairs and the Vietnamese embassy. Can you talk about that a little bit?

JM: Oh, I'd be glad to, Laura. Relations were very close between the desk and the Vietnamese embassy. I was fairly often invited—my wife and I were fairly often invited to social affairs there. We knew Ambassador and Madame Tran Van Chuong extremely well. We also knew the officials down the line, some of whom I continued to remain with as friends for years afterwards. I knew Tran Kim Phuong. I knew Nguyen Phu Duc. I knew the number two. I can't recall his name. I knew all of the officers in that embassy quite well. So we had very, very close relations. I'll mention Laura, a rather amusing incident that occurred at one dinner I attended, my wife and I attended given by Ambassador Chuong. It was a formal dinner, black tie, long dress. I still had owned as a tux only the one I had bought when I was in college when I went to my junior prom. It was rather ill-fitting by that juncture. I bought a new one for this dinner. To my consternation, it was found when I was seated at the table that I'd forgotten to cut the tags off the sleeves of this new tux jacket. So Ambassador Chuong, who was being very

amused by this, called in the cook. Rang for the cook and said, "Get a pair of scissors so he can cut these tags off." The cook appeared with big cooking shears to cut off the tags. There was great hilarity all around the table at that. I was the butt of it, but I was sort of the pleasant butt of this. I know Ambassador and Mrs. Chuong remembered this for many years afterwards, and seeing them in later years, they often would recall this incident. I might also add, Laura, I remember one of these occasions when we had been at the Vietnamese embassy for—this one, I think, was for lunch. All the other guests had left. My wife and I stayed on a little longer with Ambassador and Mrs. Chuong. I might just say a few words about Madame Chuong. Excuse me. As you know, they were the mother and father of the famous or infamous Madame Nhu.

LC: Yes.

JM: They—I'll get into that a little later, that relationship. I suspect that Madame Nhu's imperiousness was in a sense inherited from her mother. The Chuong—Madame and Ambassador Chuong, both came from the aristocracy or mandarinate of Vietnam. They were real aristocrats in birth and upbringing and the way they conducted themselves. Madame Chuong could be a pretty imperious individual, but we became well acquainted with her and found her extremely warm underneath and liked her very much. At this particular luncheon where we stayed on, she gave my wife and me a complete rundown on the time that she and Ambassador Chuong had been captured by the Viet Minh, the communist fighting the French and the non-communist Vietnamese. She said that they were conducted at night on a long, long walk through rice paddies. She said she kept slipping off these narrow dikes between the rice fields into the mucky water underneath. Somehow, they managed to get out of the communist clutches. I don't remember how now, but she said this was a horrible experience. She said they didn't know whether they might be executed or not or held for years in prison. So they obviously had gone through a harrowing experience at this time.

LC: Did she or, Joe, do you have any memory of about what time period this was?

JM: I believe it was probably in the late '40s, but I think more likely in the early '50s at some point.

LC: Do you know where it happened?

JM: I believe it was somewhere in what became communist—later became Communist North Vietnam. I believe, but I'm not sure. It could have been central Vietnam, because I think Ambassador and Mrs. Chuong emanated from central Vietnam. Again, I'm not sure of that.

LC: Yes. I believe I understand that they were from the Dinh area.

JM: From which area?

LC: Dinh. D-I-N-H, which then was in North Vietnam.

JM: Oh, I see. Oh. Oh, Dinh, D-I-N-H. I thought you said "Z." Excuse me. Dinh, okay. Right.

LC: Yes. But I'm not sure that's accurate.

JM: I think you may be right.

LC: But a very interesting, very interesting story. You mentioned that she seemed actually quite warm as a person.

JM: Oh, yes, underneath she was, once one became well acquainted with her. I'd like to go on a bit about the Chuongs while we're talking about them.

LC: Yes, please. Absolutely. Yes.

JM: Ambassador Chuong was a charming individual. He was certainly not a heavyweight in the substantive sense. His later successor, Bui Diem was much more of an effective ambassador in terms of developing relations not just with the State Department, but with other branches of executive—other parts of the executive branch and also with quite a number of congressmen. But when the Buddhist crisis occurred in 1963, fomented in part by their daughter Madame Nhu, at the height of that crisis in an extremely dramatic move and break with their daughter, Ambassador and Mrs. Chuong and the entire staff, officer staff of the embassy except for one officer, resigned. That was very highly played in the American press.

LC: Yes.

JM: They decided to stay on in the United States after that time, lived in a very modest house in the Maryland suburbs of Washington. When we were back in Washington in late '68, early '69, we resumed our contact with Ambassador and Mrs. Chuong. We were invited there for dinner one evening. My wife found she was coming down with some sort of illness and developed a chill. Madame Chuong went upstairs and

said, “I’m going to get a wrap for you, because you’re obviously cool.” Came down with a very beautifully elaborate silk—I think, what do you call them, bed jacket—which I think she put around my wife to keep her warm, an instance of her humanity. I also remember in 1969 when Tran Quoc Buu, the head of the Vietnamese Labor Federation, was in Washington for a visit. I gave a dinner in his honor at our house, and among the guests were Ambassador and Mrs. Chuong. There were so many, we could not be seated at our small table. So it was buffet dinner. We also had just beyond the dining room, what we called our recreation room, which led right to the furnace room with only a curtain separating it. It was nice and warm in winter in there, so we always found it very cozy because of the heat that came in from the furnace. With this overflow of guests that night, we seated some people in that room to eat the buffet dinner. I happened to walk in that room at one point and I saw Madame Chuong seated on the sofa there close to the furnace, the curtain going to the furnace room. I said, “Oh, don’t you want to switch?” Oh, she said, “No. I’m just fine. This is just lovely here.” She was extremely cordial and warm and friendly that night, as she always was. Of course, the very tragic ending of this couple is that they were smothered in their sleep by their own son. This happened, I think, in the early ’70s. They were still living in Washington. This son, who had had a very checkered career, the brother of Madame Nhu, he had originally been an opponent of Diem. At the time that the Diem government was approaching its crisis in 1963, he switched his support of the government and was reputedly the—one of the principal authors of a list for assassination of American officials in Vietnam, including some in the embassy, including our number two. After Diem was overthrown, I’m not sure what happened to him for several years. But eventually by the time we were back in Washington in ’68, ’69, he was living with his mother and father there. Because I remember the night we were at Chuong’s house for dinner, he was present there that night. He did not have a great deal to say, but he was there. I think it was just a year or two later that he smothered his mother and father. I don’t think he was ever charged for murder. I think it was decided that he was mentally deranged. So that was a tragic dénouement of the story I have to tell about our relationship with the Chuongs.

LC: Well, it’s a terrible story. What was the son’s name, Joe?

JM: Oh. I can't remember. It's obviously Tran Van something, but I can't remember that name. I can't remember the other name.

LC: Were there a number of children in addition to the son and the daughter that we talked about?

JM: There was as far as I recall only one other daughter, a daughter who when I was on the desk, was married to a Vietnamese whose name I think was Nguyen Van Chau, was a high official in the Diem government. She decided at some point, I think, in '58, to run off with a Frenchman, abandoned her husband, and go to France. I don't think was ever heard from again. Now this was Madame Nhu's sister, who was obviously interested in romance and not in politics. That's the only other child that I believe existed in the family.

LC: One other question, Joe, on the murders. You mentioned that you thought perhaps the son was just found to have been insane or something like that.

JM: Yes. I think so.

LC: Any idea—was he placed at St. Elizabeth's or somewhere like that?

JM: That I do not know, Laura. I just don't recall what happened to him in that respect.

LC: Okay. Was there any sense that at that time or anything that you heard subsequently that may have suggested this was not simply a family affair?

JM: Not that I ever heard of, Laura. When this took place, I was abroad. So I was not well acquainted with many of the details.

LC: But it was in the early '70s at some point?

JM: I think so, as I recall. Yes.

LC: Okay. It's a very sad—

JM: Very sad outcome.

LC: Very sad story.

JM: Because I was very fond of both of them personally.

LC: Now, the ambassador. You mentioned that he was charming but perhaps not as much of a policy heavyweight as Bui Diem.

JM: Right.

LC: How effective was he? He stayed in office until '63, as you mentioned.

JM: That's right. I think he came to Washington. He was the first South Vietnamese ambassador to Washington. So he must have been ambassador for, I would say, at least seven or eight years. He certainly was ambassador when I took over the desk in '58.

LC: Was he—in addition to your friendship, was he a welcomed figure at the State Department? No doubt he also visited you there.

JM: Yes, he did. He made very few official calls at the State Department certainly during the time I was desk officer. He did not intervene extensively in American-Vietnamese affairs at all, which was one reason I say he was not particularly a heavyweight in the policy field. Laura, I might mention another earthy incident, and I hope you'll forgive this. You may want to "X" this out.

LC: I think it's fine. Go ahead.

JM: Ambassador Durbrow, our ambassador in Saigon, was back on consultation at a point when I was—I think shortly after I took over the Vietnam desk. He went and made a call as he always did when he was back in Washington on Ambassador Chuong. I happened to be in the car with him shortly afterwards. I turned to him and I said, "Was that a useful call?" Durbrow, who could curse a blue streak and had a violent temper, said, "As useful as a man's tits." So I don't know whether you want that in your record or not. (Laughs)

LC: (Laughs) Well, it's certainly to the point, as it were.

JM: It's graphic.

LC: So, Joe, it's fair to say then that the ambassador—that Ambassador Chuong was not the primary conduit of substantive information?

JM: No. It was to our embassy in Saigon, very much so, very much so. We rarely turned to him for substantive matters.

LC: Okay. Let me ask a little bit about another embassy and whether—my question here has to do with the French in Washington. Did the French have any concerns over the time or express any concerns over the time that you were on the desk about American policy towards Vietnam or investments in Vietnam?

JM: Laura, I can't specifically remember any incidents of French intervention on that score. Somebody from the French embassy obviously had an officer dealing with

Far Eastern affairs, just as we had in our embassy in Paris to maintain liaison. Now I assume he must have made some contact with me, but this—with the passage of years, I can't remember any specific contact with him. I can with an Australian officer from his embassy. Not with the French, but it must have been.

LC: What happened with—what happened with the Australian?

JM: Oh, he came in I think simply for a briefing to get up-to-date on certain aspects of our dealings with the Vietnamese government. Australia was very interested, of course, in that area.

LC: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

JM: No. There was no substantive protest in any way. It was just to acquire information from us about what we were doing and what we were thinking.

LC: Now in a walk-in briefing like that, Joe, can you give a sense of the parameters that you had to operate within in sharing information with an allied country? I mean, obviously some material is classified. Can you talk about how you would make determinations?

JM: Well, it would depend very much, Laura, upon what country the caller represented. That would determine the extent to which one—the degree to which one might go into our policy and program dealings with Vietnam. Program, probably no problem. But on policy for example, how we were assessing the growing non-communist opposition to Diem with certain foreign representatives of embassies in Washington, I would have been extremely cautious. With the Australian, I was probably pretty frank in what I told him because I knew we had very much of identity of interest and objectives with respect to Vietnam. So one judges that according to the country. According to the country for who's representative is asking questions.

LC: Okay. Joe, did you have much interaction with White House staff members over the time period that you were on the desk there?

JM: No because the national security advisor, who later became extremely prominent, I assume there was one.

LC: Yes. I was—

JM: In fact, I even put it that way. I don't think there was any particular contact with the White House. What I remember much more than the national security advisor

was something called, I think, the Operations Coordinating Bureau or Office, which I believe was in the White House. Maybe it was in the State Department. Maybe that's what we called the office in the State Department. But I don't recall any particular contact with the White House at that point. Certainly not the way it developed in the 1960s.

LC: What about this bureau that you mentioned? What was their function?

JM: Well, the Eisenhower administration wanted to make sure that there was coordination among various departments in Washington. As a result of this White House approach, the Operations Coordinating [Board] was set up. That may have been in the State Department because I think the lead on coordination was then pretty much, I think, in the State Department area. What later became the NSA Operation, National Security Advisor operation. That was really a later development. But the Eisenhower administration was very interested, as I say, in ensuring that there was some kind of organization coordinating policy and operational approaches among the various departments. Incidentally, I just read in this biography of Eisenhower's, which I think I mentioned to you earlier, that Eisenhower was not particularly in favor of having the State Department take the lead in affecting this coordination because on the basis of its own experience, he said, "The Department of Defense will never take guidance from the State Department." That's probably a pretty astute observation.

LC: Well, it leads me on to another question. How much was there in the way of flow of information between the State Department desk that you managed and the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) office in South Vietnam?

JM: Well, I wasn't in touch with the MAAG office directly, but I was very much in touch with military colleagues in the Department of Defense. I remember that my opposite number there was a Colonel Evans. I was often on the telephone with him, saw him personally, and actually we exchanged social visits as well. We operated quite closely with the Department of Defense.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about Evans?

JM: He was as I say, he was a colonel. I know he was very intimately acquainted with high society in Washington, but I think he was a career officer. He was a Washington native and, like I said, came from a very prominent family. We had—as I

say, he and I had very cordial relations. We didn't always agree because his hands were tied a bit by, particularly by JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff) decisions. He used to have to clear things with both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and with what he called the Department of Defense. That is with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for International Affairs. I'm not sure that was the exact title, but that was the substance of the operation of that department and that branch of the Department of Defense, which dealt with foreign policy. He used to have to clear things with both those offices, because I can remember pressing him for clearances. He said, "Well, I've got one, but I haven't got the other. I still have to press them together." So he had his coordinating problems within the Department of Defense, too, between the military and the civilian.

LC: Yes. Well, that's always been a problem but probably a good problem I think to have in the long run.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, let me ask you a little bit about a figure. Again, I don't know whether this is someone you ever met, but certainly he comes up in the literature about this period in South Vietnam a great deal, and that's Edward Lansdale.

JM: Yes.

LC: First of all, did you ever meet him?

JM: Yes, I met Lansdale. You know his background. Do you want me to say anything about that?

LC: Well, I think that would be great, if you would. Yes, please.

JM: Well, Lansdale became well known as a counterinsurgency, an effective counterinsurgency expert because of his support of Magsaysay in the Philippines in the fight against the—what was it, the Huks there, the communists in the Philippines. Magsaysay, when he became president, managed to put down that communist guerilla resistance, and Lansdale was a very close advisor to Magsaysay. After that, he came over to Vietnam long before I was involved in Vietnam as, I believe, as an advisor to Diem. I think that was the role he played. He was there for some time. I don't remember exactly when he left. He was no longer in Vietnam, I believe, when I became desk officer, and certainly was not there when I was in Vietnam until he was sent out by President Kennedy shortly after Kennedy was inaugurated. I think it was even one of the first steps

Kennedy took with respect to Vietnam to send Lansdale out to give him an assessment of the situation. By that juncture, my previous view that support of President Diem was in American interest had altered. I felt that Diem represented an obstacle to achievement of our objectives in Vietnam. That is, maintaining an independent South Vietnam. Lansdale was still very much a supporter of Diem. He went back to Washington and recommended strong support for Diem, which became the policy of the Kennedy administration by the spring of 1961, when we got a new ambassador, successor to Durbrow. It was Fritz Nolting, Frederick Nolting. He came out with direct orders from Kennedy to provide maximum support to Diem. I learned—Laura, this is rather interesting—I learned many years later from reading the official record when it was publicly released of U.S. relations with Vietnam in '61, that Lansdale had in effect painted me in his return to Washington as a defeatist as far as the war in Vietnam was concerned because I felt that we could no longer win it through Diem. That I suppose could have—might have led to my early removal from Vietnam, but didn't. I wasn't aware of this until many years later, however. Interesting how one picks up these things in subsequent documentation.

LC: Yes. It must be a strange feeling to have lived through these events and then to find out—

JM: How precarious my own position might have been. It probably was.

LC: Yes.

JM: That's right. That may be better not to know, Laura.

LC: Okay. But you did have occasion to meet Lansdale at some point?

JM: Yeah. I probably met him during that visit to Vietnam. I probably talked to him, in fact. I'm pretty sure I did at that juncture, yes.

LC: But somehow he was clearly, according to the FRUS (Foreign Relations of the United States) document that you're talking about, he formed some kind of opinion about you from whatever source.

JM: Well, by that time it was fairly well known within the embassy. I never let it be known to the press. I think it got out to the press but I, as an official of the embassy, even though I disagreed with the policy approach, I never discussed it with the press

because I think that it's the responsibility of any official to support publicly what the policy of his government and his embassy is.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: That I felt very strongly about. But he obviously had learned that because it was well known that by that time that there was a real split within the, not just the embassy but the other U.S. agencies in Vietnam about whether we should continue to support Diem or not.

LC: Absolutely. That's something that I hope you and I will have a chance to talk about in more detail.

JM: Yes. Laura, before we leave my Vietnam desk activities in Washington, I would like to mention a development that occurred in the summer of ['59] just as I was preparing to go on my assignment to the embassy in Vietnam. A Scripps-Howard tabloid newspaper in Washington published over six days a quote "expose" closed quote by a reporter who had been sent out to Vietnam by the paper of our aid program. This so-called expose was immediately picked up by the Democrats in Congress to try to belabor and attack the Eisenhower administration. Our Ambassador Durbrow, the head of the economic aid mission, Arthur Gardner, and the head of the military aid mission, Lieutenant General Sam Williams, were all called back to Washington to testify before, I think it was the Foreign Relations Committee, over an extensive period. My departure for Vietnam was delayed to provide any support I could as desk officer to our people who were testifying there. Subsequently, after I got to Vietnam a few weeks later, Senator Albert Gore, the father of the gentleman who ran as the Democratic candidate for president in 2000, and Senator Gale McGee of Wyoming arrived in Vietnam to take sworn testimony in further pursuit of this investigation by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The upshot of this was, Gore in particular was trying to foment—was an opportunist trying to take political advantage of this for the Democrats. But the upshot was, that the only thing that was found out of line at all in this extensive investigation recalling all three of the senior American officials from Vietnam back to Washington, sending two senators out to investigate in Vietnam, the only thing found out was that the head of the economic aid mission had two deep freezes in his house rather than one, as authorized by the regulations of the AID administration. Rather understandable in a

tropical country where a good deal of entertaining had to be undertaken by that particular official. So that so-called expose fizzled out into nothing, absolutely nothing.

LC: Well, it's interesting, because one of the other questions that I wanted to ask you about your time in Washington was your relationship with the Hill. I don't know whether at that time, the State Department had a special office that handled State Department's relationships with Congress. Was that the case?

JM: Again, Laura, I just don't remember whether we had an assistant secretary then for congressional relations or not. But I think maybe we did. As a desk officer at that time, I did not have any direct relations with the Hill. I certainly had extensive ones later in the '60s, but not at that time.

LC: Okay. For a congressman or senator, let's say he wasn't necessarily on the hunt for someone's head, but who wanted a real briefing on American policy. How would they go about getting that? Now, this was during that time period. Would they call a deputy assistant secretary or someone like that?

JM: Well, they—I don't think there was nearly as much individual briefing of members of Congress by people from the State Department. Certainly, not at the lower level. Of course, I was a higher level official later. Then I did get involved in that quite often.

LC: Sure.

JM: But at that time, I suppose I shouldn't really answer that question because I can't answer for the higher-level officials, whether they engaged in individual briefs. Certainly, they were called up for formal testimony often enough. There probably was. I know I certainly engaged in it extensively later. But I was not high ranking enough to get involved in it.

LC: You were just the lowly desk officer.

JM: Laura, I just want to add one little amusing footnote to this visit by Senator Albert Gore and Senator Gale McGee to Vietnam. Incidentally, I liked Gale McGee very much from the outset and maintained personal relations with him for many years afterward. He was a very pleasant, fair person. Gore, I didn't think so. I didn't like at all, and never did subsequently. My wife was asked by the embassy to give a tea for the wives of those two senators who had come to Vietnam. She gave the tea. Both senators

appeared at the end of the tea to pick up their wives. They came into the house and I think had a drink with us. Gore in best politician fashion, wanted to kiss all three of our little daughters. Well, the baby of them, Ann, absolutely refused to be kissed by this Democrat. Even though she's now pro-Democratic, I've always admired her for that, what shall I say, prescience as a five or six-year-old at that point. She adamantly refused.

LC: Did you say that she's now thinking that she's a Democrat?

JM: Yes, unfortunately.

LC: But not a Gore Democrat, presumably.

JM: Well, I think she did support Gore in 2000. I think she probably—I'm sure she did. Laura, I'm not going to—in view of the time, I'm not going to attempt—one other thing I wanted to cover while I was in Washington. For a brief period in the summer of 1959, I was the Cambodian desk officer as well as the Vietnamese desk officer. Some interesting developments arose then in Vietnamese-Cambodian relations, which maybe we can cover the next time.

LC: Okay. Let's do that. We'll start there. For today, we'll take a break.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [11] of [57]
Date: November 5, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the fifth of November 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech. I'm speaking with the ambassador by phone from your home in Nevada. Sir, good morning.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Last time, Joe, we talked about the time that you spent on temporary duty as the Cambodian desk officer in addition to your responsibilities on the Vietnam desk. Can you tell me what timeframe we're talking about?

JM: Yes. This was several weeks in the summer of 1958. One Cambodian desk officer had departed, and his replacement had not yet arrived. So the director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs asked me to assume the additional duty of handling the Cambodian desk during this interim period of several weeks in addition to my primary function as the Vietnam desk officer.

LC: At this point, as the Vietnam desk officer, did you routinely see material that had to do with the Cambodian internal political situation?

JM: Not necessarily all the communications, certainly those that involved relations with Vietnam. Actually since we had—I think we had daily staff meetings with the director of the office where each of us reported on the main developments, particularly from telegrams that had come in our embassies in the respective countries. Each of us was pretty well up-to-date on what was happening in all of the Southeast Asian countries.

LC: Now, Joe, I don't know whether you will recall, but if you do this would be a good place to supply these names. Who was the outgoing officer, and who was coming in?

JM: Hoyt Price was the outgoing officer and I believe at that point Hoyt, who had been a Foreign Service officer for about a dozen years, resigned from the Foreign Service to accept a position with the Gulf Oil Company in Pittsburgh. The successor to him was Loren Askew. Incidentally, I just saw an obituary on him in the Retired Diplomatic

Officer's Association bulletin. So he has just died, unfortunately, although I had not been in contact with him for many years.

LC: Was he a Southeast Asianist, or was this a new—

JM: Yes. I think he was. I don't recall whether he'd served in Cambodia or in an adjacent country now. That I don't remember. You probably also would like to know the name of the director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs at that point, because Ken Young, who had been director for most of my period in that office, had left also to join, I believe, an oil company. He was succeeded by his deputy, Eric Kocher. Kocher was a man who had had, I think, six years as consul general in Kuala Lumpur in Malaya during the guerilla war there. So he was—and he had spent, I think, about a year or more as Ken Young's deputy. So he was extremely well acquainted with Southeast Asian affairs as director of the office.

LC: Yes. That's very interesting. Do you know how long he remained in that post, or roughly? Was he there the whole time that you were in Saigon?

JM: No. During the last oh, few weeks, maybe two or three months that I was in that office, he was succeeded by Dan Anderson, who had been the number two in the embassy in Saigon. Kocher received a field assignment as the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission), I believe in Belgrade.

LC: Okay.

JM: DCM being Deputy Chief of Mission. I shouldn't use symbols.

LC: Yes. That's fine.

JM: DCM, Deputy Chief of Mission is obviously the number two in an embassy.

LC: Yes. Joe, tell me then what the situation was, the general outline of the situation in bilateral relations between Cambodia and South Vietnam at the time you took over.

JM: Well, the relations were always a bit strained between the two, first for historic reasons. I think it would be remembered by many of our listeners that at one time, Cambodia, which was known as the Khmer Empire, was one of the great, probably the greatest, certainly greatest power in mainland Southeast Asia around the, oh, the 1000s, 1100s, and 1200s. That's the period in which the great temples were built at Angkor. Many people think just of Angkor Wat, which is certainly the single-most

impressive monument there, but there are many, many temples in that complex, including a little jewel about thirty kilometers away, Banteay Srei. While I'm talking about that, I'll just intervene to say that while we were stationed in Saigon, my wife and three children and I took a trip during the Vietnamese New Year celebration, the famous Tet holiday, to fly over to Angkor. We spent, oh, I think at least two or three nights there. We did not stay in the famous old tourist hotel, which had been built during the period of French-protected Cambodia. I think it was called the Grand Hotel, but we stayed in a new motel. The old hotel was about seven kilometers from Angkor Wat, while the new hotel was built sort of right in the lee of Angkor Wat. So we could easily walk from our motel over to this most famous of all the temples, while we were there. We learned while we were there that Sihanouk was going to give—Sihanouk who had been king resigned as king, but remained as the principal political leader of Cambodia, was entertaining ex-King Leopold of Belgium at the Grand Hotel. I think we learned that if we came in to the Grand Hotel, we could be present at the exhibition of Cambodian classic dancers, which Sihanouk was putting on to entertain Leopold.

LC: My goodness.

JM: Among those dancers were some of Sihanouk's own children. So we did go in that night for that and enjoyed seeing the thing. We also were mightily impressed by all the temples. Those temples had been lost to civilization for many, many centuries until they were rediscovered by the French in the 1890s, I believe. They began to unearth them in this sense. Many of them had been covered up by gigantic trees, which had grown out of them in this lush jungle area, roots covering them. Some of them were still in that condition. I remember seeing one temple that was totally encased in the roots of a giant tree. But we visited many of those and we had our three children with us, as I said. They were then, oh, thirteen, eight, and seven. I can remember that one temple, I think Angkor Thom or Bayon, I'm not sure which, had a long access route to the temple lined by sculptured figures, particularly of snakes which were called *nagas*. We had a Cambodian guide explaining it to us. He always drew this word out, *naga*. I remember our children; this impressed them and they were always talking about *nagas, nagas*. I also remember that when the occasion came to go out to this delicate little temple, Banteay Srei about thirty kilometers away, either my wife or I had to baby-sit with the

children. So we opted, I don't know whether we threw a coin or what. Anyway, my wife got to go. I never did get to see Banteay Srei.

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: But she came back reporting that it lived up to its status as a jewel. Built, I believe, of light red sandstone, a real beauty. But there are—I think that complex is again open to tourists. It certainly is one of the great sites of the world. I just thought I would mention that while we were talking about Cambodia.

LC: Absolutely. Absolutely. I just want to ask one follow-up. Now I think, Joe, earlier you mentioned to me that apropos of your time spent in Europe and Iceland that you were not a great photographer. Was your wife at all?

JM: No. We did have a camera when we arrived in Vietnam, a cheap little camera. I remember I think it was on a visit to Hue in Central Vietnam, the film got stuck and it was never functional again and we haven't had a camera since 1960. So we did not take any pictures ourselves at Angkor. Although we have lots of them but we didn't take any ourselves.

LC: How amazing. Well, you have a very clear memory of that trip, it sounds like.

JM: Oh, absolutely and a very good memory of that trip. That was one of the great sightseeing occasions in our career. We've seen many, many sights around the world, but that still stands out as one of the greatest.

LC: I would believe that. I should think so. You had been in Cambodia just briefly I think, is that right? For twenty-four hours or so? During your—

JM: That was in 1957 on my first—I was then stationed—well, I was stationed in Washington at the time. That was the first trip I'd ever made to Southeast Asia. I did spend twenty-four hours in Phnom Penh. I think maybe I mentioned when we were talking about that trip that the plane from Bangkok to Phnom Penh made an interim stop at Siem Reap, which is the village close to the great temple ruins. I think maybe I mentioned that the terminal there had a mud floor. "Terminal," in quotes, had a mud floor. It was just a shack by the runway. After we got on the plane, I looked out and I saw the pilot of the plane outside under the wing with a screwdriver, trying to do something to—in affect, maintenance on the plane. Not very reassuring to the

passengers, but everything turned out all right. This is probably repetitive. I probably mentioned all this before.

LC: No. I don't remember that you did, but that does give a sense of Siem Reap in 1957. It gives you a fairly good sense.

JM: Exactly. I think by the time we got there in '60, '61 this was. I think early '61. I think by then, there was a new terminal with a hard-surface floor and considerably bigger, because tourists were by that time beginning to come to Siem Reap to see the temples.

LC: Oh, okay. You had begun by talking about the historic background to border province.

JM: Yes. The Khmer Empire was at its height, as I indicated 1000s, 1100s, 1200s, and then began to decline. The Vietnamese moved into southern Vietnam from north and central Vietnam as I recall in the 1700s. There were many—that area had been under Cambodian control at one time. There are still many Cambodians there. The Vietnamese certainly took over control of that area and they proved they were much more numerous in population and squeezed—there were still a number of Cambodians who remained, but they squeezed the Khmer out as far as any Khmer also being the same synonym for Cambodia. Squeezed the Khmer out in terms of any effective control, either politically or economically. There was great, always great resentment by Cambodians against Vietnamese. Not only resentment. The Vietnamese looked down on the Cambodians as being inferior. The Cambodians particularly resented this attitude in view of the fact that at their height, they were a much greater power than Vietnam was. So the two peoples were extremely antithetical toward each other. It's also, I think, important to remember that the—in old what the French called Indochina, the China part was Vietnam. They were a people of Chinese culture. The Cambodians and the Laos were of Indian culture. So they were extremely different peoples. When we get to Laos, I'll point out that I've never found any two peoples in the world more different in every respect than the Vietnamese and the Lao. All three of these people are very distinct in history and physical appearance and in race. None of them like each other very well. Both the Laos and the Cambodians have always resented the Vietnamese attitude of superiority towards them. So relations were never cordial between Cambodia and

Vietnam. In the summer of 1958, suddenly in July of that year, the Cambodian government accused the Vietnamese of moving a border marker in a totally unpopulated, wild area in central Vietnam eight or ten kilometers so that the Vietnamese could claim some additional territory. I don't think anybody ever knew whether this actually happened or not, but the Cambodians certainly believed it completely. There soon developed a major crisis in relations between the two. We in trying to maintain friendly relations with both, and not wanting Cambodia to—which in its official position was more neutral in the conflict with the communists than we were—we didn't want them to move any closer to the communists. So we tried to assuage and quiet the situation without much success. Sihanouk decided that his position vis-à-vis South Vietnam's would be strengthened by moving to recognize Communist China diplomatically. Now that was a major defeat for American policy at that time, because one of our principal policies in the Far East was to hold the line on any further diplomatic recognitions by countries of Communist China. So this was a major policy reverse as far as we were concerned. As a result, the State Department summoned back to Washington the ambassador, the head of the economic aid program, and the head of the military aid program, two American aid programs, for a review of our policy toward Cambodia, which occurred in the office of Walter Robertson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. I sat there as the note taker, listening to the discussions back and forth among the three from the field and Robertson. Very discursive discussion like so many so-called policy reviews. Nothing very clear whatsoever, just a lot of points of view put forth. When I finished, I wondered how really to write up the review of the official record of this session. So I just sat down and recorded very briefly the gist, the thrust of what each person participating in this discussion had said. It passed brilliantly. The ambassador to Cambodia approved it, and so did Walter Robertson. That was the official record of this session.

LC: Now who was the ambassador at that time?

JM: Carl Strom, S-T-R-O-M. Incidentally, the outcome of this review was absolutely no change in U.S. policy whatsoever, despite the fact that Sihanouk's move toward diplomatic recognition of China had represented a major defeat for us. We did not decide to make any change in our aid programs toward Cambodia. I sometimes

wonder whether that wasn't an error. I came to believe as the years grew on and Sihanouk's criticism of the United States grew constantly stronger to the point that he, like Sukarno in Indonesia and Nkrumah in Ghana, were among the principal so-called third neutral countries, Third World countries.

LC: Yes.

JM: Which were critical of the United States. I thought we should have terminated our aid program if not then, within the next few years. Actually, Sihanouk did us one of the greatest favors he ever extended to us in 1964, when he terminated the aid programs himself. We should have done it much earlier ourselves and not waited until he did this in order to try to spite us.

LC: Joe, I think it might be helpful for someone to understand the importance of this, the potential importance of the policy review and what it might have led to as you've outlined. If you could give a sense of the background to and the reasons for U.S. diplomatic isolation of the People's Republic of China. I mean, at this point that's so hard to understand. I wonder if you could just from the perspective of the early—

JM: Well, this policy position on the part of the United States grew out of what had happened in China in the late 1940s. It will be remembered that in 1946, the Truman administration sent General Marshall out to China in order to try to work out some kind of reconciliation between the Chinese nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek and the communists under Mao Zedong. Even Marshall was there for quite a number of months. That mission ultimately failed to achieve any results. The war between these two in China continued. By 1949, the communists had succeeded in ousting the nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek completely from the mainland. Chiang Kai-shek moved his remnants of his government and armed forces to Taiwan. The repercussions of this on the political scene in the United States were tremendous. The Republicans accused the Democrats of having, quote "lost" close quote, China. This was a major domestic political issue in the United States then and for quite a number of years afterwards. The position taken by the Truman administration voiced by Dean Acheson, as secretary of state, was, "Well, we'll just have to wait until the dust settles"—this was after the communists had taken over—"before we determine what our policy can be." The principal result was that we did try to isolate the new communist government in

China by urging countries to avoid diplomatic recognition. The first big loss on that was almost immediate when the UK did—the United Kingdom did recognize Communist China diplomatically and sent an ambassador to Peiping. But during most of the 1950s, we had been successful in pretty much holding the line against diplomatic recognition beyond the few countries which had done it almost immediately after the communists took over until Cambodia broke that barrier. So in a sense what happened there was more important than it would seem on the surface, as far as the United States was concerned.

LC: Okay. Can you say a little it about Sihanouk himself? Did you meet him? What kind of impression had you for him?

JM: Let me continue then, Laura.

LC: Yes, please. Yes.

JM: During this period I was on the desk, Sihanouk decided to attend the UN General Assembly session in New York and make a speech as so many heads of state or government do there. Then, I think, the General Assembly convened each year in August. Now it does in September. This was in August. We decided, since Sihanouk was going to be in the U.S., the State Department decided to invite him to come on down to Washington for discussions. Now I'll pause at this point to say there is a difference, a very definite difference in the way the United States government receives a foreign head of state or government, depending upon whether it is a state visit or an official visit. A state visit is a much more formal visit. The president himself gets involved, extends hospitality, receives the individual at the White House for a long discussion. In an official visit, that does not necessarily take place. I, as desk officer, and I think many people in the State Department would like to have seen President Eisenhower receive Sihanouk at the White House because we thought that since Sihanouk was personally a very vain, egotistical, mercurial individual, that he could be influenced simply by the fact that Eisenhower agreed to talk to him. Sihanouk, I believe—Sihanouk had already met with Zhou Enlai I know and perhaps with Mao at that point. Both the Russians and the Chinese were much—received many more heads of state or government by their head of state than we did at that juncture. Partly because the Chinese communists and the Russian heads of state were not so preoccupied with constantly dealing with a legislature

and a press that was critical. They had more time to do so. In a sense, that placed us under disadvantage. If the president of the United States has so many domestic responsibilities vis-à-vis the institutions I've talked, just mentioned, that he doesn't have the same time that they did. I think to some extent the Chinese communists and the Russians were able to get a leg up on us in this respect because Eisenhower did not agree to receive Sihanouk while he was there. Sihanouk flew down from New York to Washington in a small—I guess it was a small regular commercial airline. I remember that Walter Robertson, the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, and I were out at the National Airport to meet him as he got off the plane. We greeted him and his first official meeting in the State Department was with Robertson. Robertson, as he was wont to do, used this session to lecture him almost constantly on why he was wrong to have recognized Communist China. All Sihanouk did was sort of smile and nod. He didn't say a great deal and that session achieved absolutely nothing. John Foster Dulles as secretary of state also agreed to have Sihanouk visit him in his office. I was the note taker at that session. That was a quite different sort of session, much to my interest and surprise. This was, I think, the only time that I was ever in Dulles's office. Dulles engaged in a long philosophical—is the word disposition, I believe—on communism, saying to Sihanouk that, "We believe that if we continue our policy of containment with respect to both the Soviet Union and Communist China, that eventually these regimes will change color. That there will be internal changes in those countries that undermine communism and eventually bring about its demise." Now that I found extremely fascinating, coming from such a strong and bitter anti-communist as Dulles. That certainly was not the public image of this man preaching to Sihanouk from what he thought could be the long-term evolution of communism, which turned out to be correct in both countries, as we certainly—it's very clear in what happened to the Soviet Union. In my view, quite clear in view of what's happened in China. Even though the Chinese political leadership still maintains the façade of communism, their policies as they outline them and execute them internally within China are anything but—they're about as capitalist as the United States these days. So both regimes have eventually evolved in the way that John Foster Dulles in the summer of 1958 envisaged they would. I've always remembered that as being extremely prescient.

LC: It's quite amazing.

JM: Isn't it?

LC: Yes it is.

JM: Maybe you've seen other evidences of this basic attitude on the part of Dulles. This was the only time that I ever saw it.

LC: I don't know that I have seen any discussion of this kind of long-range thinking about the impact of containment.

JM: Yes. Isn't that fascinating?

LC: Yes. That containment was in some ways, I think, largely labeled and advertised as an end in itself.

JM: Yes.

LC: That there really wasn't a lot of further thinking. So it is a very interesting story.

JM: It's interesting in the view of the way history has turned out in those two countries.

LC: What was Sihanouk's demeanor during this meeting?

JM: Well, again, he just listened. He didn't have many comments to make. Robertson entertained Sihanouk at a luncheon at Blair House, an official luncheon. Sihanouk invited John Foster Dulles as his principal guest for a dinner at the Cambodian embassy. This was also—the guests at that dinner, John Foster Dulles and his wife, Walter Robertson and his wife, Allen Dulles, the head of CIA and his wife, and a secretary of the Army, whose name was Bruekner. These were the principal guests at that dinner. My wife and I were not included in the original guest list, but enough declined that I think the day before the dinner or maybe the very day of the dinner, the Cambodian embassy called to extend an invitation to us to be included to help fill out the situation. One of my wife's fondest memories—remember, we were then stationed in Washington with three small children, no domestic help. So my wife serving as the dredge in the house and the kitchen most of the time, found herself that evening in a long dinner gown, I in a tux like everybody else in a very splendiferous occasion. Then the next morning as she's told many of her friends, she found herself scrubbed down on her knees, hands and knees on the kitchen floor scrubbing, a reversion to her Cinderella

status. But she does have a very good picture from *Newsweek* taken at that dinner, showing in the front row Sihanouk, the Dulleses, and the Robertsons. In the second row Allen Dulles, the secretary of the Army is seated there but leaning toward the front row talking to Sihanouk while the other two couples were talking to each other. My wife on the third row seated next to Mrs. Kocher, the wife of the director of Southeast Asian Affairs. This is a picture she's always treasured. Sihanouk put up after the dinner that evening, also put on classical Cambodian dancing with one or more of his children, possibly including the ballet dancer who has just been elected king of Cambodia. I can't assert that as fact, but I wonder whether it wasn't the same one because I think he brought both a son and a daughter among his many children as dancers on that occasion.

LC: Well, the point that you've just mentioned leads me to ask another question that is about the sort of long-term relationship and something that again we can probably see best over the long haul. That has to do with Sihanouk's larger relationship with China. He, obviously as you know, Joe, has been a long-term resident in Beijing, not only recently, but also at other periods during difficulty.

JM: Oh, secretly over the last what—

LC: Twenty-five or thirty—

JM: Twenty-five years now, I think.

LC: What, over time, have you made of that relationship? Can you comment about his ties to the People's Republic?

JM: Well, I believe that Sihanouk has certainly ever since 1958 felt that China represented his best possibility of support, of political support among major powers. I think this has probably proven a pretty good assessment of where his real interests lay. China has certainly manifested great interest in extending support to him, not even, but very much, and to Cambodia, very much so in the war between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese in, what was it, the late 1980s, I believe. China has—Chinese under the communists and even today continues to maintain strong relations and interest with Cambodia. So I think he was correct in looking to them as his principal international political supporter, not only for himself, but for his country as well.

LC: Do you think that part of that decision in 1958 may have been related to the "enemy of my enemy" sort of thinking? Such that if the United States was such a strong

supporter of South Vietnam that he as the head of state of Cambodia had to find a countervailing—

JM: Oh, yes. I think that was very much in his thinking. Let me go on and mention a few interesting subsequent developments. These developments did not occur during the time I was briefly handling Cambodian affairs, but in the year or two later.

LC: Sure.

JM: In I think it was September 1959, a Cambodian—I believe he was a general by the name of Dap Chhuon attempted a *coup d'état* against Sihanouk. Unfortunately I think the South Vietnamese government of Diem and Nhu, I think Nhu in particular, was in some ways backing this guy against Sihanouk. We got involved in an unfortunate accidental way. The CIA station in Phnom Penh furnished the rebels with a radio in order to maintain contact with them so we'd know what was going on. We weren't supporting them, but we just wanted to know what was going on. Well, when this brief coup attempt was quashed, this radio was found by the Cambodians and was immediately identified as an American radio. Sihanouk, of course, was led to believe that we were instrumental in fomenting the coup, which cemented his relations with China, of course, as his supporter. Now, fascinatingly, I think it was about a month later, a Cambodian Army sergeant came into our embassy and said that he was being involved in a Communist Chinese coup to overthrow Sihanouk. We immediately went to Sihanouk and told him about this. Then he thought very briefly we Americans were great. Shortly after that, a package arrived at the royal palace in Phnom Penh bearing the card of an American construction contractor who was building a road from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville, a new port in Cambodia, under our economic aid program. This package turned out to be a bomb. It exploded, killed some of the royal palace officials. Sihanouk believed that we were behind this effort simply because the card of the American contractor was there. Now obviously Sihanouk sometimes didn't think things through at all, or evidently didn't at any rate. Obviously, if we were going to mount this thing, we wouldn't send the card of an American contractor in with it. But this is almost like comic opera developments relating to Cambodia. This oscillation back and forth during a relatively brief period in 1959, one of the more fascinating things, I think, that—one would never dream of these sorts of things would happen. A sergeant walking in saying

he's part of a Communist Chinese coup to overthrow Sihanouk, and then briefly later a bomb with the card of an American contractor at the royal palace. Can you really believe all these things?

LC: Right. It does stretch credulity a bit. But, Joe, there's also the other side which is that Sihanouk, through all these twists and turns, of which you know better that anyone, there have been many, still plays a central role. Can you explain his longevity? Not his physical longevity, obviously, but I mean his—

JM: There is a long tradition among the Cambodian people of reverence for the royal family. Sihanouk has been able through thick and thin, through all the changes that have involved Cambodia over the past few decades, been able—but I don't know that he maintained his, but he's certainly been able to benefit from it, because it is obviously still there. It's interesting to me, the extent to which the Cambodians have been interested in this recent change in the kingship from Sihanouk, who decided to resign it, and the son he designated. Still is very much there. So to a degree the same thing exists in Thailand, I believe. There is still great reverence among the Thai for the royal family in Thailand. That family has certainly not tried to play the same political role in Thailand that Sihanouk has done in Cambodia. Although at times it's acted as a stabilizer when there have been changes in government through *coups d'état* in Thailand. But it's interesting in both those countries that this has continued to be the case. Laura, I'm just going to mention in this connection that to a degree, the same thing was true in Vietnam, South Vietnam. Not toward the royal family, but toward President Diem. I was going to, after we got to my arrival in Vietnam and one of the first developments took place, a presidential election in August or September of '59, where it was clear to me that Diem without any attempt to manipulate those election results would have received the great bulk of the votes of the peasants in the countryside simply because their feeling was they were expected to vote for him, so they would vote for him. This is sort of equivalent to this reverence for the royal families in Cambodia and Thailand. Whoever is head of the government, the bulk of the uneducated populace feels a certain fealty to them in political terms.

LC: Joe, maybe, unless you have some other observations about the Cambodian situation, this would be a good time to transition to your actual move out to the Far East.

JM: Yes, right, because shortly after this Cambodian-South Vietnamese border incident and our involvement and the consequences that I've just discussed—no, excuse me. That was 1958. So it wasn't shortly after. It was a year later, in the summer of '59 that I was assigned to Saigon as the chief of the political section with the title of counselor for political affairs and wound up my duties as the Vietnam desk officer in Washington to go to Vietnam. I think I mentioned the last time, the last major thing I had to deal with as the Vietnam desk officer was the manufactured crisis which developed because of a Scripps-Howard newspaper reporter's "expose," so-called, of the aid program in Vietnam and our principal officials in Vietnam were called to testify for a committee. As soon as that hearing was over and they had returned to Vietnam, I was able to wind up my affairs and proceed to Vietnam. My departure was delayed because of this. I sent my family on to San Francisco by train from Washington. I joined them by air in San Francisco. We stayed one night before we boarded a ship to cross the Pacific. At the Hotel Pickwick in San Francisco, at which my wife and I have stayed a couple of times, just a few weeks ago once and about a year-and-a-half ago, first time in forty-five years in that hotel. We identified ourselves and they were very interested we had been guests in 1959.

LC: I'm sure they were. I'm sure they were.

JM: We boarded an American president liner to cross the Pacific. We were three weeks en route. We stopped first at Manila, where the evening we pulled out of there in our ship I saw, I think, the two or three most gorgeous sunsets I have ever seen in my life. A lot of clouds in the sky and the sun was magnificent red and blue colors. Absolutely stupendous. But, that night also proved to be in a way a disastrous one because within a few hours, we were in a terrible typhoon, which lasted for twenty-four hours. We learned when we hit the next port that the typhoon was so bad that it had bent the bow of this big ocean liner, so that indicates how terrible it was. I was a bit concerned during the process because our cabin was pretty far forward toward the area which held the—toward the cargo hold. At some point during the typhoon, some of the cargo broke loose. Every time that we got on the top of a wave and the ship fell into the trough of these terrible typhoon-generated waves, that cargo hit the bulkhead near our cabin. I had read about some occasions when the cargo had broken through bulkheads under these circumstances.

Since I had all of my family with me, I was rather concerned for a while until this typhoon was over. I remember going up for lunch while the typhoon was still in progress, and I think there were about four people in this huge dining room. Everybody stuck to cabins. We obviously were not permitted out on deck at all. It was very dangerous. Then our second port was in Yokohama. We had quite a number of hours there. So the whole family got a taxi and went to Kamakura, which is outside Yokohama, where one of the greatest Buddhist shrines in Japan, I guess with one of the biggest Buddhas of all in that country. We also had dinner. As I recall, had our first dinner in a Chinese restaurant, not a Japanese, but a Chinese restaurant there with the whole family. Incidentally, we were traveling with another Foreign Service family whom we had known originally in Istanbul. They served there with us. They were on their way to assignment in Hong Kong. The name was—his name was Jim Gustin. So I think all of us got into a couple of taxis to go to Kamakura and also had a meal together in this Chinese restaurant. A wonderful memory, particularly since—you know how the Japanese like to take photographs? Well, at one point while we were at Kamakura, a Japanese couple came up to us. I don't think they spoke any English, and we obviously didn't speak Japanese, but they made known that they wanted to take a picture of us and our family, these strangers. So we all posed for this Japanese couple and had our pictures taken, which I hope are somebody's heirloom at this point. Then we boarded the ship and went on to Hong Kong, which was our ultimate—that's where the ship terminated. We were three weeks aboard ship, which, Laura, is about one week too long, was then about one week too long for my taste. We also crossed by ship when we came back from Vietnam to the States three years later. Those were our two longest ocean voyages. I think they pretty much cured both my wife and me of traveling by sea. We have no interest whatsoever in our old age in taking cruises. We find ship travel a bit of a bore. One thing I learned even then when I could eat far more than I do now is that I always overate during the first couple of days and therefore felt over-stuffed for the rest of these long journeys, even though I did try to exercise playing deck tennis and walking the deck. Plus the fact that one can read for only a certain number of hours each day. So we just get bored aboard ship. We much prefer traveling by air and then by land. We can see much more. So contrary to so many old people, we avoid cruises these days.

LC: Very good. Another stereotype shot down. (Laughs)

JM: There's the reason I just gave. Now we landed in Hong Kong and I think we were there at least one night. The two principal hotels in Hong Kong then were still the Peninsula and the Miramar, both on the Kowloon side rather than the Hong Kong island side. We stayed in a much less prepossessing hotel, which I believe was called the Palm Court. It was a British-owned and operated hotel, but very simple. I think the entire family of the five of us were all in one big room, as a matter of fact. What I do recall, particularly from that is that we found a Russian restaurant near that hotel with a bakery on the ground floor, restaurant on the second floor. We had learned to love Russian beef stroganoff when we were stationed in Istanbul, and we went upstairs and we ordered beef stroganoff there, and they made it with tomato sauce rather than sour cream. Not quite as good, for anybody who wants to order beef stroganoff. Then we took a plane from Hong Kong to Saigon. We were supposed to be first class, but something had happened. So I remonstrated strongly with the steward, because we were not only back in tourist class, but I think the entire family of five including the small children were put all separated from each other. I guess I complained strongly enough that they served us champagne free of charge to try to assuage us.

LC: Did it work?

JM: Well, most certainly. Laura, I think maybe it's a good idea to stop at that point before we arrive in Saigon, because that's going to be a long saga.

LC: Okay, will do. Thank you.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [12] of [57]
Date: January 21, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the twenty-first of January 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and Joe is speaking to me by telephone from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: It's a pleasure to resume our sessions. I'm very happy to do so. I want to ask first of all about the person who took your place on the Vietnam desk in the State Department in 1959 as you were coming out to Vietnam?

JM: Yes. His name was Chalmers B. Wood. He had been in Saigon for two years as the number two in the political section. I had known him for quite a number of years. I knew him when he was the Greek desk officer a number of years previously. He was still in Saigon for, I think, about a week after I arrived and then left to take up his duties on the desk in Washington, and remained in that position for, oh, at least two years and perhaps even longer. Although during the latter part of his stay, a Vietnam working group was created with a more senior officer as the head of it reporting directly as, I recall, to the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs. The organizational setup with respect to Vietnam in Washington changed a number of times over the years in the 1960s. But he was there at least a couple of years and perhaps longer. He is now dead, as a matter of fact. He is no longer alive.

LC: Now did Mr. Wood stay with Vietnam into the 1960s?

JM: Yes. He subsequently in the 1960s, I don't think this was immediately after his service on the Vietnam desk in Washington. I think he had an interim assignment somewhere else. But in the mid '60s—no, I should say in the late '60s, he came back to Vietnam as a provincial senior advisor in the CORDS (Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support) program. That was the acronym for the pacification program, which had about six thousand Americans in it working very closely with the South Vietnamese from central government right down to district level. He headed one of the

provinces in Central Vietnam. As a matter of fact, on one of my visits to Vietnam in 1969, I saw him again, visited his area and resumed contact with him at that time.

LC: Do you know if he was in the Central Highlands or was he out on the coast?

JM: No. He was in the lowlands. He was in the province of which Qui Nhon is the capital.

LC: Okay. You saw him then on one of your tours?

JM: On one of my visits. I was then stationed in Washington myself. We'll get to that much later during our talk. Actually, I might just say at this point, from mid-'68 to the end of '69, I was first the deputy and then the head of the Vietnam section in AID. Vietnam had been raised by Lyndon Johnson in 1967 in AID, the aid agency from part of the East Asian division to a separate division all to itself. Usually—not usually, in all cases except Vietnam, those divisions consisted of an entire continent. But Johnson, in order to increase focus on Vietnam, raised it to the status of a continent, in effect. I was deputy for six months and then headed it for a year. It was during that period I visited Vietnam three times. Once in January 1969 on a tour of central Vietnam, I stayed overnight with Wood and talked to him considerably because his province was an important one in that area.

LC: Absolutely. I wonder during the overlap, when you arrived in Saigon in 1959 and he was still there, was it part of your job to sort of brief him on the Washington scene?

JM: Well, he, having served on the Greek desk for I assume a couple of years, he was quite familiar with the way Washington operated. So he did not need to be oriented in that respect. Since he had been in Vietnam for a couple of years on the ground there, he was well acquainted with the situation there. So he didn't really need any orientation to speak of to take over the desk in Washington.

LC: Okay. He was ready to move right in, I would imagine. Equally I would have thought you were pretty much ready to move right in to the embassy?

JM: Exactly. Contrary to most of my other assignments, where I was going into a country with which I had had no prior experience, having served on the Vietnam desk for a year-and-a-half in Washington before I arrived, I was on the ground running

immediately because I was quite familiar with all the problems and operations in Vietnam from my experience on the desk.

LC: Just to review quickly for someone who might just be picking up this part of the interview, you had been out to Vietnam in 1957?

JM: Yes. I had spent a week in Vietnam on my first trip to Southeast Asia, since I was slated to take over the Vietnam desk. I was not actually on it at that stage, but slated to take it over. I did spend a week and began my detailed acquaintance with the problems of Vietnam.

LC: Now, Joe, as a political counselor, can you describe what the general duties of that post would be in any embassy and then—

JM: Yeah. Let me describe the organizational setup in Vietnam, which was pretty typical of an American embassy in any country. The embassy, of course, is headed by the ambassador. The number two is the deputy chief of mission. Under those two there are five operating divisions: political, economic, administrative, and consular. I should say four, not five. Fifth, in effect, was the USIA, which was the information agency, which was a separate operation but came under the ambassador's purview. The political section in Saigon consisted of six officers with myself as the chief of the section with the title of counselor for political affairs, three or four secretaries. That actually was the biggest unit I had ever headed in my career thus far at that point.

LC: Now, Joe, were you responsible for personnel matters of those officers reporting to you?

JM: Well, I was certainly responsible for the preparation of the annual evaluation reports on each officer and responsible for supervising their output. I could be held responsible for anything they did, since I was the chief of the unit. Now, Laura, I will add one interesting thing with respect to the political counselor's job in Saigon. In the traditional Foreign Service, a political unit is primarily an observer operation with reporting responsibilities in Washington. One could compare it in a sense with the press and its reporters. We were essentially doing the same thing the press does, reporting information on developments and analyzing them with respect to U.S. interests. Most political sections in our embassies abroad are not what I call action or operating units, but in Vietnam, as the situation was unfolding, we increasingly became an action or

operating unit, contrary to the situation in most embassies. Actually, that makes the job much more interesting and challenging, because you're not just a passive observer and reporter. You're actually involved in action and operations with respect to U.S. interests in the country concerned. But unusual, as I say, for a political section of an embassy. But that is the reason I look back on my tour in Vietnam and a subsequent tour in Laos, where I was definitely an operator. I was on loan to the AID agency, which I will discuss with you later. Those were the two most challenging assignments that I had during my career, even more so than being ambassador in Madagascar, in the 1970s where U.S. interests were so limited.

LC: We undoubtedly will delve into the operational aspect, but before we even talk about the reporting work and some of the things that you encounter, I'd like to ask about those other sections in the embassy, again for someone not totally familiar.

JM: In Saigon, the economic section was totally integrated with the AID mission, the economic AID mission. Actually, the head of the AID mission was—well, I'll put it this way. Originally starting in 1954, the number two in the AID mission was the counselor for economic affairs in the embassy. By the time I arrived, the economic counselor had also become the head of the AID mission combined in one person. His name during all my tour there was Arthur Gardiner. He was a man who came into the State Department in 1958. Actually, I should say—yes, early '58. I was still in the Economic Unit of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. I hadn't yet become the Vietnam desk officer. But I briefed him in detail on economic activities and operations on the situation in Vietnam before he left, and I remember being rather pleasantly reassured about what I was doing by having him say that I had given him the best briefing during his period of orientation in Washington before he went to Saigon. So I knew him before I got to Saigon, and had worked closely with him during the years there. Subsequently, you will find I also had contact with him when I was in Laos and he was outside the government in another position, but involved in Laos in Vietnam in a, oh, semi-private, semi-official capacity.

LC: Okay. His background, can you say anything about that at this stage?

JM: I'm just trying to remember what Arthur's background was. I think he came in some way from the business world, but maybe he was involved in—I don't think we

had many—we didn't have many think tanks at that point. So he didn't come from that. I'm just not absolutely sure what Arthur's background was. But he was well known in Washington and whatever he had been doing, he was quite active in it.

LC: Now the AID mission in terms of personnel would have been, I'm going to guess here, substantially larger than the Economic Unit?

JM: Oh, yes. The Economic Unit consisted of I'm going to guess here, probably three or four, probably about four officers, whereas the AID mission had I think even by then hundreds of employees and, of course, grew larger as the war developed in Vietnam.

LC: Now would the reporting line of the AID mission have been to—I guess it would have been the predecessor of USAID?

JM: Yes. It was the—let me see now what it was called at that moment there? I think the—

LC: It went through a couple of changes.

JM: Oh, it went through several changes. I'm not sure I can remember now, because—I think Foreign Operations Administration, but I'm not sure that was the title. I think it may have been. The aid mission at that stage, its acronym was USOM, United States Operating Mission, I believe. I'm not sure of that "O." We always referred to it as USOM. Later in the 1960s it became known as USAID, U-S-A-I-D, U.S. Agency for International Development mission to the country concerned. So the acronyms did change over the years.

LC: Now the administrative and consular sections—

JM: Just let me add that the aid mission did fall under the overall purview of the ambassador. I might just at this point mention something interesting that developed. There had been in the late '50s a considerable argument, confusion, and even feuds as to the relationship of the U.S. ambassador in any given country with the head of the military aid mission. In '61, shortly after Kennedy took over as president, he issued an executive order which said the ambassador is in charge of all U.S. interests and operations in the country. His number two, the deputy chief of mission, is also senior to the other heads of U.S. operating missions in a given country. Now that was, the State Department considered that a considerable victory, which it was. The difficulties had arisen particularly, not so much in earlier than that. Not so much with the authority of the

ambassador, but whether his number two, the deputy chief of mission outranked the head of the military aid mission or the head of an economic aid mission. This executive order issued by Kennedy defined that. I cannot say whether it still exists or not, but I will add this interesting point. In 1963, when the military aid mission in Vietnam was converted by President Kennedy and the Secretary of Defense into MACV, which stood for Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, to be headed by a four-star general, whereas the previous MAAG, Military Assistance Advisory Group, had been headed by a lieutenant general. Since that agency, MACV, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, was considered an operational command and not just an advisory operation, the four-star general did not come under the purview of the ambassador, the authority of the ambassador. The two were coequal. That situation continued to exist in Vietnam for all the subsequent years of the war.

LC: How did the State Department view that particular development?

JM: Well, obviously one always likes to have final authority in the government in any particular situation and didn't like it, but there was nothing the State Department could do about that. After all, we were moving increasingly on the military side into an operational phase in Vietnam, no longer just in a military advisory phase to the Vietnamese military. There was really nothing the State Department could do about it, and that, I think, is pretty standard practice. I wonder what the setup is in Iraq today, where you have the ambassador, of course, on the one hand and you have the commanding general of U.S. military operations. I suspect, but I don't know, that the two are coequal.

LC: Yes. It's one of the interesting things whereon one might hang a comparison of the two operations in the two countries.

JM: Actually, during those years from 1963 on in Vietnam, I don't think there was ever to my knowledge, any serious dispute between the ambassadors and the head of MACV, the Military Assistance Command, except in the earlier stages. In the first few months, there were differences between Amb. Henry Cabot Lodge in Vietnam and another Massachusetts man, the four-star General Harkins, who headed MACV, because they disagreed over continued U.S. support for President Diem. So there was some

difference during those early years, but subsequently, I don't believe that there was any serious differences.

LC: Joe, let me ask you a little bit about the other sections that were reporting to the DCM and the ambassador.

JM: Oh, yeah, the ambassador and the administrative section of the consulate.

LC: Yes.

JM: The consular section was not very—there was only one officer in that section. It was a small one. So though it had its duties in an operational sense, it was not a significant section. The administrative section, which you have in all embassies or consulates for that matter, is essentially a housekeeping section with respect to personnel, housing, budget, and matters of an administrative nature.

LC: But these are still Foreign Service officers?

JM: Yes, they are. They are definitely Foreign Service officers.

LC: They tend to be specialists within those tracks in the Foreign Service?

JM: They tend to be, although the State Department has oscillated back and forth between whether to keep its officers primarily in a single, functional cone, or to shift them back and forth between cones. You were either a political cone, economic cone, administrative and consular cone, that's what I mean by that.

LC: Sure.

JM: From time to time, since the administrative and consular sections have felt that they are valued less in the scheme of things than the political and economic sections, the State Department has made a particular effort to try to pick some ambassadors from the administrative and consular staffs. But this I think is bound to oscillate back and forth over history.

LC: Just if I can pursue that for a moment, was the thinking behind the nomination of personnel from those particular tracks or cones to the status of an ambassador, was that seen essentially as having a broader effect on the other Foreign Service officers in those cones? In other words, it was a morale move?

JM: Yes, exactly. That, I think, was certainly an important part of the motivation for adopting this procedure.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about USIA in Saigon when you arrived in the late '50s or early '60s. Can you talk a little bit about the setup and their functions?

JM: Yes. The USIA operation when I arrived and—well, not throughout, but throughout most of my time there was headed by an officer by the name of John Anspacher. USIA had then been established by Congress as a separate agency from the State Department, but its operations definitely came under the authority of the ambassador. I don't think there was ever any dispute on that part as far as USIA or the chief operating officers in the particular country were concerned. I think today, USIA has been folded into the State Department. I'm not absolutely sure of that. But at that time, USIA had its own separate systems with respect to personnel and all aspects of administration. But I don't think there was any great problem, even when it was an independent agency, between the USIA people, called U.S. information service people usually abroad in our missions abroad and the ambassador.

LC: What sorts of functions did they undertake in Saigon? What was their daily work? Do you know?

JM: Well, as in most countries, under the chief of the USIA mission, there is a press officer and a cultural officer. Those were the two main divisions. The press officer performs the kind of activities which the title connotes, operations, contact, and relations with both the American press correspondence in the country as well as with the local press and also an effort to increase knowledge of U.S. policies and attitudes with respect to that country through various kinds of operational programs, including operation of a USIS (United States Information Service) library. Sometimes classes in English among other things and various attempts to foster a better attitude on the part of the people of that country toward the United States. Something that is very significant today, as we well know.

LC: Yes. Absolutely.

JM: Then the other, the other main branch of USIS operations abroad was the cultural affairs operation, which really, I think, cultural affairs officer supervised the library rather than the press officer, and then also operated any exchange of persons programs between the United States and that country. Interestingly, in Washington, that function was in the State Department rather than USIA in Washington, but abroad it was

in USIS. But it operated, I think, without any very great problems. For example, one of the activities that the cultural officer engaged in was to pick Vietnamese leaders in various areas of activity for visits to the United States. In most cases, they'd never been to the United States, and this was an attempt to increase their knowledge of our country and hopefully to influence their attitudes toward our country. Then also from time to time, U.S. leading representatives in various areas were brought to that country. I remember for example in 1961, when the first coup attempt against President Diem occurred, started about three o'clock in the morning the evening before. Most of us had been at a piano concert. Let's see. I'm not sure—I guess it was Rudolf Serkin, who was well known, internationally known as a pianist, had given in Saigon under a USIS auspices as a particular example of the kind of person brought to a foreign country, including Vietnam.

LC: So the evening before, you were at this concert?

JM: That's right. So was the ambassador. So were most of the senior personnel in the embassy as well as a lot of leading Vietnamese figures.

LC: Well, I'm making a note that I'll come back to asking you about that event.

JM: Oh, yes. I'll have a lot to say about that, Laura.

LC: Okay. Good. Excellent. Terrific. Joe, your personnel who reported to you in the political section, can you mention a few of those names?

JM: Yes. When I arrived, the number two in my section was named Daniel Maloy. He was a brother of Francis Maloy, who was a very well known, extremely able Foreign Service officer who rose very rapidly during his career. He was ambassador in Lebanon when he was assassinated there in the, I guess in the 1980s. He may have been ambassador to another country before he was there. He was extremely well regarded. Unfortunately, his brother, who worked for me, was not by any means as able. I finally managed to get the State Department to transfer him and replace him by a much better officer, Robert Barbour, whom I am still in contact with, as a matter of fact. We're still close friends. Barbour had a previous tour in Vietnam. Barbour was our first Vietnamese language officer, trained by the State Department. He had opened the consulate in Hue in central Vietnam in 1957. After his tour in Vietnam was up, was transferred to Paris. To his chagrin, I got him transferred from Paris back to Saigon, but

he proved to be as I anticipated, an extremely able and useful officer. He also rose very well in the Foreign Service, concluded his career as ambassador to Suriname in South America. Bob, in fact, although he's retired now, still serves a few months each year as an inspector for the embassies abroad, embassies and consulates for the State Department, a close friend and a very able officer whom I like and respect very much. Incidentally, Bob was in Iraq as an inspector earlier this year. No, not this year, excuse me. I guess it was in October or November, excuse me. I talked to him after he came back and among the things he had to say, which I found interesting, was that the Sunnis in Iraq are not nearly so united in their opposition to the existing government and to U.S. policy as the U.S. media seem to indicate. I found that quite interesting.

LC: Well, it lays a new layer of complexity on what we know must be very complicated, but I think we're not hearing—

JM: Now the other officers. I had a Chinese language officer, not very good, unfortunately. Later replaced by a considerably better officer who I don't think was a Chinese language officer. Actually, I never thought that a Chinese language officer was particularly useful or necessary in Vietnam. We did have a considerable Chinese element in Saigon, particularly in the Cholon section of Saigon that was totally Chinese. But the Chinese were apolitical in Saigon. They didn't really get involved in politics in any particular way at all, as far as I know, throughout the Vietnam War. So I don't think a Chinese language officer was particularly justified in Vietnam. Then I had two or three other junior officers. Some of them, replacements arrived in the normal course of operations. Some of the officers who arrived there and served under me, besides Bob Barbour, eventually became ambassadors. One in particular is James Rosenthal, who was a very able officer. I think Saigon was his second post, I believe. He subsequently became ambassador to countries in Africa, one of which was Guinea. The other I think may have been the Central African Republic, but I'm not sure. I'm still in touch with Jim Rosenthal. We see him and his Swedish wife from time—he lives in San Francisco. We see them from time to time when we go up there for the opera.

LC: Oh, okay.

JM: Then another young officer, who was serving either his first or second post in Saigon, and with whom we are still in touch, is named John Helble. All these officers

are now retired. Helble is settled in the far suburbs of Washington, actually a considerable distance out of Washington, I think thirty or forty miles, and set himself up in retirement as a wine grower. A grape grower for wine, and operated that quite successfully for a number of years until his vines succumbed to a terrible disease which he couldn't get rid of. The last Christmas card we had from him this year indicates that he's totally out of the grape business now.

LC: Well, that's very sad.

JM: Isn't it though? We're still in contact with a number of those officers who served under me in Saigon, particularly the ones I regarded very highly. All three of these I've spoken of. Helble did not become an ambassador, but he did achieve the status of deputy chief of mission in Malaya among other advanced posts. He may have also been the deputy chief of mission in the Philippines. I'm not sure of that.

LC: Okay. Let me ask you about the people to whom in the embassy you reported. The DCM was who at this time in 1959 when you arrived?

JM: The DCM when I arrived, his name was Howard Elting, a veteran Foreign Service officer who—I'm going to talk a bit about the ambassador first because there's considerable interrelationship between the ambassador and the DCMs, the deputy chiefs of mission. The ambassador when I arrived was Elbridge Durbrow. Durbrow was a man who was anti-communist, as I put it, down to his toenails and also a man who was quite suspicious in his approach to all people. He always was wondering, always trying to look to see whether he was getting to the inner person or not, and what that person was representing to him. Vietnam was a very good locale for him to exercise this propensity of his because the Vietnamese personality is as complex as any in the world. I remember having Vietnamese say to me, "The Vietnamese character is a circle within a circle within a circle. Even we Vietnamese are never sure when we've got to that final, inner circle of another Vietnamese." So Durby could exercise this quality of his very well in Vietnam. Sometimes I thought he overdid it. I have been known to say to him, "Sometimes you have to look at people and situations head-on and not try to see what lies beneath, what you suspect they lie beneath but doesn't really." Durby also was a man who was explosive in his temper, which could result in a lot of profanity and sometimes vituperation. Another quality of his was that, or I should say a defect of his, was that he

was not very well organized in his writing. He was a man who had total recall of any conversation he had, any official conversation he had. So he would come back and initially did a lot of writing up about it and then submitted to his number two that when I arrived, to Howard Elting, to put in more logical order and even correct his grammar at times. Later, he turned to me to do this. Thank God he switched from sending out his writing. It's awfully hard to rearrange writing. It's much easier if the fellow who wants it done for you debriefs himself verbally, orally to you and then you can put it down in writing yourself. Thank God that's what he used to do with me.

LC: So you have some clue where he's going?

JM: Yeah. As I say, he had total recall, but not in any chronological order. So when he debriefed, it just simply all poured out of him. Then one had to take it and arrange it in some sensible, logical order, comprehensible order in the cable reports to Washington. Usually what he was doing was debriefing himself on a conversation with President Diem, which we usually cabled to Washington, the views that emerged during this meeting between the ambassador and then the president. So you can see that Durby wasn't the easiest person to work for. Now, he and Elting got along very well. I don't think Elting ever tried to cross him particularly, but you would accept his changes and his refs. Although woe to the subordinate who failed to highlight or omitted one of what Durby regarded as the nuggets of his conversation. You could then be the subject of some of his vituperations, so you had to be very careful in that respect. Now Elting remained for only about four months after I arrived there. He was replaced by Francis Cunningham. I think this was Cunningham's third post as deputy chief of mission. He came to Saigon from Finland, where he'd been deputy chief of mission. He was picked personally by, I don't think Durbrow knew him actually, but the State Department sent out various personnel files of possible candidates for the number two slots. Durby picked them on the basis of [his] personnel file, I believe. Unfortunately, Francis, who was an excellent linguist and could speak French and German like a native, Francis soon became very much afraid of Durby's explosive personality. Though as number two, I should be expected to report to him rather than directly to the ambassador. Through him to the ambassador, he would often ask me if he had something to say to the ambassador, "Why

don't you go do it instead of me?" because he was so much afraid of this explosive aspect of Durby's personality.

LC: How often would that come out, Joe?

JM: Excuse me?

LC: How often would that explosiveness come out?

JM: Oh, quite often, Laura.

LC: Really? Wow.

JM: I would just have mentioned one very amusing incident. One afternoon, when the embassy was officially closed, it was probably a Saturday afternoon, Durby came in, got into the elevator in the embassy, started to go up to the fifth floor where his office was. The elevator stuck and pretty soon the Marine guard, who was down at the entrance, began to hear a line of profanity emerging from the elevator. He didn't know who it was so he yelled up, "Who in the—who do you think you are, the ambassador?" The answer came back, "You're goddamn right I am!" (Laughs) I guess most of us get annoyed if we get caught in a stuck elevator.

LC: Sure. That's pretty funny. (Laughs)

JM: Anyway, Cunningham remained the DCM even though he can't be said to have been particularly effective, because in view of his fear of the ambassador. But shortly after, Durby was replaced as ambassador in 1961 by Frederick Nolting. Nolting chose an old friend of his, a Foreign Service officer whom he regarded very highly to take over from Cunningham, even though Cunningham's two-year, minimum two-year tour had not expired at that stage. That man's name was William Trueheart, a man who subsequently became our ambassador to Nigeria. All of these, all three of these deputy chiefs of mission are now dead, actually, as is Durby, as is Fritz Nolting.

LC: Joe, that sets up, I think, an interesting question that I'd like know if you know anything about. That has to do with the report that ambassadors tend to file at the end of each year reflecting on the post that they've been serving in and projecting what's going to happen the next year. I wonder if you had anything to do with the writing of Ambassador Durbrow's report at the end of 1959.

JM: Laura, I don't remember. I cannot recall any such reporting requirement. Maybe it was a custom in certain—on the part of certain ambassadors to do it, but I don't

recall if there was any reporting requirement of that nature imposed by the State Department on ambassadors. I think we sense our assessments and analyses of the rapidly developing problems in Vietnam periodically, but I don't think we attempted a year-end wrap-up. Whenever we had an assessment, yes, as political counselor, I was involved. I'll get into that later in describing my activities in that position.

LC: The reason I ask is that there's one of a number of books published by William Duiker. I don't know whether you might be familiar with him. He's published at Stanford University Press.

JM: No. I don't know him.

LC: I just want to read you just a short snippet and see what you think about it, if you want to react at all. The book is called—it was published in 1994 and it's called *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina*. It's a very interesting book, but let me just read this little snippet to you. "In his year-end report, written in December 1959, Ambassador Durbrow described the problem," and he means the problem in Saigon, the problem of the regime. "He described the problem as primarily political and characterized the South Vietnamese leadership as more concerned with security than economic development." Does that sound right to you?

JM: Does this ring a bell with me?

LC: Yeah.

JM: No, I don't recall any. There may have been such a year-end report. I don't recall it. I don't believe that that represented any long-term view of Ambassador Durbrow because he was extremely concerned with security.

LC: That's kind of what I wanted to get at. What was his orientation as you picked up from him and from discussions with him. What was his view on what U.S. policy should be doing or was doing well?

JM: There was a considerable difference, Laura, between Durby as ambassador and the lieutenant general who headed the Military Assistance Advisory Group. That was Samuel Williams, familiarly known as "Hanging Sam" because he had been in charge of the execution squad at the Nuremberg war crime trials in Germany in, I guess '46-'47. Considerable difference in this respect. Williams was, in his advice to the Vietnamese government in the military sphere, was adhering very much to the

conventional military operational approach. Just as then that was the tendency also of President Diem. Durby felt very strongly in view of the way the security problem in Vietnam was unfolding with various communist guerrilla activities including assassinations of village chiefs, teachers, other prominent, other significant personnel at the village level, that we should be concentrating in our military advice to the Vietnamese on training and operations much more on an anti-guerrilla approach rather than conventional military approach. That difference did persist between the two right down to Williams's departure in—well, he departed just shortly before Durbrow did in 1961. So there was a very considerable dispute in the military sphere over that, but Durbrow was very strong, I think, in the importance he attached to security. I never felt there was any question of that.

LC: What kinds of things did he ask you as head of the political section to bring to him? What was the relationship he wanted to have with you as the head of his political section?

JM: Well, as I say, initially my operation there was more of the passive reportorial sort than of an operational type, but that very soon changed. As we get into things, Laura, I will indicate to you the kind of operational thing and there I dealt very much with the ambassador. For example, I'll cite this and then go into detail later. In, let's see. This was I think about September, October 1960, when—and this shows Durbrow's interest and priority attached to this security sphere. He felt that we should develop a counter-insurgency plan for Vietnam since the Vietnamese government was not operating effectively against the communists and presented to them in hopes that they would become more effective in their operations with respect to the communist activities in the countryside. He asked me as head of the political section to chair the country team subcommittee that drew up that report. That was the first American counter-insurgency plan for Vietnam. On this subcommittee, this was subcommittee of the so-called country team, the country team consisting of the ambassador and the operating heads of all the U.S. departmental missions in Vietnam. Military, economic, information, and CIA. He asked me—and on this subcommittee, we had representatives from the military, from the USOM, from the CIA station, and from USIA. The bulk of the work in developing this plan was done quite naturally by the military representative who's name was Major Kurtz

Miller, who was very able. He developed it in the usual military manner, with a basic document and many annexes, which is the military operational planning approach.

LC: Right.

JM: But he did a good job of it. Maybe it was too long, but he did in a substantive sense, a good job. Incidentally, I worked again with Kurtz Miller in Laos in the mid-late '60s when he was the defense attaché and I was the head of the AID mission, administering both the military and the economic aid programs. So he and I knew each other, became very close and good friends and operated very well together. Especially with the example of the type of operational activity, which Durby as ambassador entrusted to me. In most missions as it turned out subsequently as I'll point out later, this job would have been given to the number two in the mission because by Kennedy's executive order the number two had authority over all of the other U.S. missions in Vietnam, just as the ambassador did. But because Durby did not have a high regard for his number two, he gave this job to me. As I'll point out later, this proved to be an important and significant aspect of my activities. But there's an example of one of the things that he expected of me. He also, of course, expected me—since the other major problem that was developing in Vietnam was the non-communist dissent spreading dissent and dissidence as far as President Diem and his method of governance was concerned, Durby expected me to both keep up with those developments in a reporting sense and as I shall point out later, begin to develop an operating approach for the U.S. government. So there are probably the two prime examples.

LC: Okay. Let me ask about what kinds of issues you first became involved with in late 1959. What were some of the primary developments that you were monitoring?

JM: Well, we certainly monitored the increasing activities of the communist guerrillas. We submitted monthly reports on those activities, summarizing them and analyzing them. We also kept reporting on the increasing non-communist political dissidence. We also had—well, we had another function, which was essentially operating, which I may as well describe at this point to you.

LC: Okay.

JM: The Geneva Accords, with respect to Vietnam, of 1954, which ended the French-Viet Minh war, had provisions governing the number of—stating that the number

of foreign military personnel in both North and South Vietnam had to be limited to the number at the time of the signing of those accords in 1954. Now at that time, the French were acting as the chief military advisors to the South Vietnamese government, but within a few months, President Diem after he took over, decided he didn't want the French performing this mission because he didn't trust them. He wanted the Americans to take it over. We were confined to the—I think it was some five hundred military advisory personnel, Americans who were in the country at the time of the signing of the accords. There was an additional four hundred American military personnel who were introduced into the country, called the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission, whose job was to recover the military equipment we had furnished to the French in South Vietnam during their war against the Viet Minh. That was their job, to try to recover that military equipment and put it back into—ship it abroad or put it back into use in Vietnam. So we had about nine hundred total American military personnel. We maintained that level until, as I shall point out later to you, 1961 when President Kennedy made a decision to raise it. I'll explain the reason for that later. As part of our job—well, let me say first. The Geneva Accords set up an International Control Commission consisting of India, Canada, and Poland, to supervise the respect for the provisions of those accords. Both the South Vietnamese government and the North Vietnamese regime set up in their respective capitals liaison missions with this International Control Commission. In Saigon, that mission was headed by a Vietnamese colonel, Colonel Nam. We worked closely with him in trying to get the International Control Commission to issue reports condemning the communist guerilla activities in South Vietnam. Now this was an operational function. It was a political section, which operated closely with Colonel Nam's liaison mission in this respect. We were trying for international political reasons to establish that the accords were being violated. The provisions of the accords were being violated by communist, North Vietnamese communist guerrilla activities in South Vietnam to establish an internationally recognized record of this. So this was another operational function of our mission. I'll go into our activities with respect to that later, Laura, when we get into this as time goes on because this did prove to be an important function. Now we had to operate not only with respect—the political section had to operate not only with respect to the Vietnamese liaison mission with the International

Control Commission. We also had remain in constant contact and relations with our own military mission because of their job. They were obviously interested in getting more personnel into—more American military personnel into Vietnam if they could, but we kept insisting with the ambassador's complete backing, that they could not exceed that some-nine hundred number of Americans who were in Vietnam at the time of the signing of the accords. That included this temporary mission of some four hundred that were introduced shortly thereafter for the purpose I mentioned. I remember having an argument with—on this very point—with no less a figure than the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lyman Lemnitzer, when he was on a visit to Vietnam in either 1960 or early 1961. So as you see, I did get involved operationally in some pretty ticklish problems.

LC: Yes. You sure did.

JM: He didn't like at all what I said and was sputtering over it, but with the ambassador's backing I held my ground at that point.

LC: I hope that we'll have a chance to return to that particular incident, too. Let me ask first about the relationship between the presidential palace and the embassy. Can you talk a little bit about Diem's government, his ministers and he, himself, and their interactions with the embassy?

JM: Yes. The government obviously was headed by President Ngo Dinh Diem, who had taken over in 1954. His brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu simply had the title of counselor but he was in effect counselor to the president though he had no official title other than that. He was very definitely the number two man in the power hierarchy. The contact liaison with the president was, of course, maintained by the ambassador. Ngo Dinh Nhu was considered the preserve of the CIA station. It was the CIA station chief which maintained contact with him. Because he had no official position other than counselor, none of our official embassy personnel was charged with [relations with Nhu]. Since Nhu also operated the intelligence agencies, but with no official title it was a pretty obvious choice of our CIA station to maintain the contact with him. The number three man in the government was Nguyen Dinh Thuan. He was both chief of staff to the president, like Andrew Card today to President Bush, with the title of Secretary of State for the presidency and also Minister of National Defense. So he had two intertwined,

very significant positions. He, however, though he was the number three and an extremely able man whom I very much respected, he had no real political base in the country. His power within the government depended completely on his relations with President Diem and behind Diem, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Now, there was another individual who often tried to influence policy, too, and that was Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, the wife of Nhu, who became very much a polarizing figure on the Vietnam political scene. These were the people who really counted in the government, with Thuan, the number three. As I shall explain later, much of the contact with him, although not solely by any means since the ambassador saw him, too, I was the contact man with him for the first year and a half or more of my assignment. Then when Durbrow's successor, Fritz Nolting chose William Trueheart to be his DCM, Trueheart became in some ways the more natural contact with Thuan. That was the relationship with that. The minister for foreign affairs was Vu Van Mau. Normally the ambassador would maintain contact with him. I maintained the contact with the number two in the foreign ministry, Pham Dang Lam, with whom I became very close friends and occasionally talked to Mau, the foreign minister, as well. Economic ministries were obviously the responsibility of Arthur Gardner, the head of the Economic Aid Mission and the economic counselor. Then the head of UIS maintained the contact with any public affairs agencies of the Vietnamese government. There you have the main lines and the head of our military mission, of course, maintained much contact with Thuan as minister of defense, but also had direct contact with the president because he valued his relations with General Williams very highly because he knew General Williams was a one-hundred-percent supporter of his.

LC: Were there other, either official or unofficial, persons with whom you had very good relationships at the beginning of your tour?

JM: Certainly as the tour developed I widened my contacts. Again, Laura, I don't want to get into things I'm going to later. We came to know very well the head of the Vietnamese trade union federation. We knew the behind-the-scenes financial advisor of the Ngo family, that is Ngo Dinh Diem, Ngo Dinh Nhu. We had many friends in the business world in Saigon. We had many friends among members of the National Assembly. So we had very extensive contacts, both my wife and myself, in the Vietnamese community. A lot of this will come out later as I discuss specific things.

LC: Sure. Okay. Joe, let's take a break.

JM: Okay, Laura.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [13] of [57]
Date: January 28, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph A. Mendenhall for the Oral History Project at Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center. Today's date is the twenty-eighth of January 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech and I am speaking to the ambassador by telephone from Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, I want to begin by just sort of opening up the discussion with regard to your service in the embassy in Saigon.

JM: Laura, as we've indicated, I arrived in Saigon in August 1959. What I would like to do this morning is start dealing with the two major developments that were unfolding in Vietnam which affected the situation so greatly there and also involved the U.S. to a major extent during the next fifteen years up to 1975. These two major developments weren't the only ones but they were certainly the principal ones. They also began to affect each other as they unfolded. These two developments were the increase in non-communist dissent with the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam. The other was the developing guerilla activities and pretty soon warfare by Hanoi against the government of South Vietnam. I'm going to start with the problem with the non-communist dissidence first. I'm just going to review briefly the historical background. Diem came to power in 1954 during the Geneva Conference on Vietnam. For the next three years, contrary to predictions at the outset, he managed to acquire a dominant position within South Vietnam. His government seemed to be relatively stable. He had to deal at the end of '54 with the Binh Xuyen, the gang-dominated police force in Saigon. He managed to master that in December of '54. Then he had to deal with the Tay Ninh—with the Cao Dai, excuse me, an eclectic religious sect in the province of Tay Ninh, northwest of Saigon, which also had its own independent armed forces and mounted a challenge to him. He managed to deal with that effectively. The third was dealing with the Hoa Hao, an offset of Buddhism in a province in southwestern Vietnam. Again, that one was dealt with effectively. He did order the execution, contrary to what we in

Washington thought should happen, of Ba Cut, who was the leader of the Hoa Hao. But he managed to consolidate his position as the leader of South Vietnam during those three years. The other thing that he did was to call a referendum on the Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai, who was the figurehead leader of the government in 1955 and won that referendum overwhelmingly. Now the other thing that I'll mention during that period, which was of significance, the Geneva Accords had said that elections should be held in 1956, two years after the conclusion of the accords for the reunification of Vietnam. I would also point out that the Geneva Accords were one of the most peculiar international documents in history because neither the United States nor South Vietnam ever signed anything. South Vietnam made no—the Diem government made no commitments with respect to those documents. The United States issued a unilateral declaration that it would not seek to upset those documents by force. When the election provisions began to become an issue in 1956, being pushed by the North Vietnamese, this young government decided that since the population predominance in Vietnam existed in North Vietnam and since it would be impossible as it was to conduct any free elections under a communist regime, that to agree to the holding of those elections would be bound to lead to the reunification of Vietnam under a communists' control. One can contrast the situations in Germany and Korea. I think we've done this previously in our discussions here where the population predominance was in West Germany and South Korea. The communists there, of course, never agreed for that reason to any free elections for essentially the same reason Diem refused to agree to these.

LC: Sure.

JM: The United States, after the Diem decision, simply issued a declaration that it respected the decision of President Diem with respect to the provisions of the Geneva Accords. I bring this up because as U.S. military involvement unfolded in Vietnam, opponents of the Vietnam War in the U.S. increasingly said that this was one of the major reasons that the—one of the major criticisms of the U.S., that it did not insist upon the carrying out of these provisions, the elections previsions of the Geneva Accords. Obviously we didn't. We shouldn't have and didn't, in my view. By the summer of '57, after this relative political stabilization of the situation in South Vietnam, non-communist dissatisfaction with the government of President Diem began to emerge because he

concentrated all of the political power effectively in his hands and those of his family. There were lots of Vietnamese, as the Vietnamese call them intellectuals. I suppose we would call them the elite, who thought that they should also have a voice in the government. When I went to Vietnam on my visit in '57, one of the things I think I indicated earlier that I was asked to look into was this question of how extensive this was becoming. At the beginning it wasn't widespread, but it gradually widened in scope and eventually, of course, led to overthrow of Diem in 1963. So it was something that developed gradually over a six-year period and did end in tragic results as far as President Diem was concerned. Right after I arrived in Vietnam in August of '59, within a few days, a presidential election was held which Diem won. I've forgotten what the percentage was. Let's say ninety-eight or ninety-nine percent or something like that. Obviously not a free election. There was an anti-Diem candidate in the election, Dr. Phan Quang Dan from Saigon. He wasn't even permitted to carry a single precinct of Saigon. This further alienated, the way the election was handled further alienated, the number of South Vietnamese elite. Actually, it was a rather foolish way for Diem to conduct himself politically because he would have won the election without any question with no manipulation whatsoever. Because in a country like Vietnam where the majority of the population consisted of uneducated peasants, I soon became convinced that they would have voted for Diem in any case because they would have felt this was what they were expected to do by officials from their village chiefs right on up. Not that the pressure would have been exercised on them. This was just the way the psychology of people like these illiterate peasants operated. So Diem could have won in any case, but instead of that he and his brother, Nhu, particularly brother Nhu, who handled the mechanics of the election, operated unfortunately. I'm going to turn now for a moment to the other major problem that began to unfold, the internal security situation in South Vietnam. For the first three years of the Diem regime, again from '54 to '57, the communists were not noticeably active in South Vietnam at all. I would estimate that the reasons that Hanoi did not take any actions during that three-year period were because it expected South Vietnam to fall into its hands without any major guerilla or military activities. At first I think it felt that Diem would prove to be so inept that it would just fall naturally into their hands. That didn't prove to be true as I've just indicated. Then it

expected that the election provisions of the Geneva Accords of ’54 would automatically, because of the population predominance in North Vietnam, bring South Vietnam into their fold. Neither of these things happened. By ’57 the internal security situation in South Vietnam gradually began to worsen with communist assassination of village chiefs in remote areas of the country, armed propaganda meetings at night, organized by remnants of the communists in South Vietnam. What North Vietnam was doing at that point was to begin to call into play the communist apparatus which had existed in South Vietnam during the Viet Minh war against the French, ’46 to ’54. To call that into play and began to re-infiltrate into South Vietnam some of the ninety thousand South Vietnamese communists who were regrouped, which is the technical term. Which were taken to North Vietnam in 1954, again under provisions of the Geneva Accords, which I’ll explain. Those accords permitted during ninety days after their conclusion, that any South Vietnamese—those accords, of course, divided the country into North and South Vietnam.

LC: Yes.

JM: Those accords permitted during those ninety days, anybody who wanted to leave South Vietnam to go north and anybody who wanted to go north to go south. Ninety thousand South Vietnamese communists went north. Nine-hundred thousand North Vietnamese, particularly Catholics, came south. So there was an exchange of populations greatly exceeding the number in the south by that number in the north. It was these people who were taken north in 1954, who by 1957, ’58, and ’59, the North was beginning gradually to re-infiltrate into the South. Now I’m going to mention a major development in May of 1959, which we were not aware of at the time but gradually became aware of over the succeeding months and years. In that month, the communist Lao Dong Party in North Vietnam took a major policy decision to what euphemistically said to promote the re-unification of Vietnam. This was their cover for the gradual official escalation of guerilla activities and pretty soon war in South Vietnam. We became aware of this decision, as I say, gradually over an extended period of time through the monitoring of Hanoi broadcast by the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service. I’m sure you’ve heard of that, Laura, FBIS.

LC: Yes, absolutely. Yes.

JM: Which was one of the major sources of information on what was developing in North Vietnam, a very important source. It was only gradually that Hanoi revealed this decision in its broadcasts. I'm not even sure it was supposed to leak out, but it did because of statements that were gradually made over the succeeding months and years by Hanoi in its own broadcasts. When I arrived in South Vietnam in August of '59, I was somewhat surprised to find that the security situation in the southern part of Vietnam still permitted a group of us to make a trip—this was, I think, my fourth day in Vietnam—to make a trip by car from Saigon down almost to the border of Ca Mau province, the southernmost province in Vietnam. Tom Barnes was on that, whom you have been interviewing, Laura.

LC: Yes.

JM: He was on that. So was Bill Colby, who was then number two in the CIA station in Saigon. He eventually became director of the CIA and a couple of other officers from the political section. There were five of us plus a Vietnamese chauffeur who drove us. When we got to Can Tho, which is the principal city in the South Vietnam, one of the two major branches of the Mekong River. There was the one called the Bassac which is shortly out of Can Tho. We stopped in a village, rented a little boat, and went for, I think, about a mile or so along the banks of that boat and stopped and talked to villagers. Tom Barnes was a Vietnamese language officer. The rest of us all spoke French rather than Vietnamese. Through Tom we were able to talk to the villagers. Then we got back into the car. We drove on down to, as I said, almost to the border of Ca Mau, spent quite some time with a district chief there, who was actually quite busy because he was preparing for the presidential elections. This was a Monday and I think the elections were to be held the succeeding Sunday. Then we went back to Soc Trang, stayed overnight in the ex-house of the province chief. I say ex-house because the provincial capital had been moved of that province from Soc Trang to Bac Lieu. Then the next day we drove gradually back to Saigon. The only untoward incident interestingly, as I say, because in Washington I felt the security situation would not have permitted such a trip but it still did at that point. On the way back a cow bolted from a ditch by the road in front of our car and was killed by our car. A peasant was right there. The local Vietnamese police were summoned. The situation was settled amicably by the

five American officials in the car, all pooling their resources and making a contribution to the peasant for the loss of the cow. In the presence of the police we did this. So there were no untoward results of this. It was purely an accident since the cow bolted out of the ditch in front of the car as it was driving. It couldn't be helped. But we did compensate the peasant for the loss of his cow. So there was no incident in American-Vietnamese relations as a result of this. That was an interesting trip. I might, at this point, mention other trips which I and sometimes my family took. That was in August. In November, my family and I drove for the five hours from Saigon to the mountain hill resort of Da Lat to spend a few days around Thanksgiving. We drove through an area that was already somewhat questionable because the road which led to Da Lat passed the infamous Zone D, which you may have heard of I'm sure in your discussions with Tom Barnes. Zone D was always a notorious area, heavily forested area—oh, I don't know—probably thirty or forty kilometers north of Saigon in which the communists did operate. We had no problems. We drove without escort. We spent a few days up there and drove back. Then other trips that I made, the next one was in January of 1960, an interesting trip. I traveled with the number three man in the AID mission, Jim Howe, who was a friend and a very able officer. We flew to Ban Me Thuot, up in the Central Highlands, stayed overnight in the ex-hunting lodge of the emperor of Bao Dai who had been ousted five years previously, which was then serving as a BOQ (bachelor officers' quarters) for officers of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group. We stayed with them overnight and then drove down a road being built by the American AID mission from Ban Me Thuot to Nha Trang, in other words, from the Central Highlands down to the central coastal lowlands. When I say a road being built it was not being paved at all. It was being upgraded with I think what was called laterite, somewhat similar to gravel here in the States. So we made that trip to Nha Trang, stayed overnight in Nha Trang. I remember we had a marvelous langouste, the local equivalent of lobster, at a French restaurateur's shack on the beach in Nha Trang. I've always remembered that very good meal. Then we drove up the coastal road from Nha Trang to Qui Nhon, passing beautiful beaches along that road, absolutely unused. Then from Qui Nhon we drove up another road under construction by the American AID mission into the highlands from Qui Nhon to Pleiku. Then from Pleiku we drove down to Ban Me Thuot on a road that had once

been paved or partly paved by the French, but which had seriously disintegrated and that is absolutely the roughest type of road, I think, one can drove on in this world. I know we were almost shaken to pieces. Then interestingly enough we drove from Ban Me Thuot all the way back to Saigon down old Route 14. We stopped at newly developing capital of Phuoc Long province. Phuoc Long was a newly-established province and a capital was being bulldozed out of sheer jungle. There was virtually nothing there for the capital at that stage. I mention this because Phuoc Long became the most exposed and threatened province throughout the Vietnam War of any in South Vietnam. Actually, it was the first province which was completely taken over by the communists in 1975. Already there had been some untoward developments not too far from there. There had been a village defense post farther down the road on Route 14, which had been attacked earlier in January. We were aware of that. We even stopped and looked at the post as we drove along. Actually, we had no problems security-wise during this whole trip. One of the interesting things, Laura, is that we were primarily, as I've indicated, in central Vietnam, except for the drive down Route 14 on the way back to Saigon. We descended from the highlands into the lowland area of southern Vietnam. The guerilla activities of the communists starting in '57 were confined for the first three years completely to the southern part of Vietnam, what was historically known as Cochinchina. There were no such activities in the central Vietnam part of the regime known as South Vietnam until later in 1960. I've always been a bit puzzled by that because there had also been major communist activities against the French during the '46 to '54 war in central Vietnam as well as in Southern Vietnam. The only explanation that satisfies me, and I think it could be the correct one, is that during the earlier years of the war in Vietnam, Hanoi tried to portray it publicly as a civil war within South Vietnam, that it was caused, engendered by South Vietnamese dissatisfaction with the Diem government. That Hanoi therefore felt that if it could be confined to the southern part of Vietnam its hand would be less shown publicly than if it had also included central Vietnam. That's the only explanation for it.

LC: That's interesting.

JM: I don't know whether you've heard that theory before or not.

LC: Yes, the suggestion of that. Also, that the historical strength of communist recruiting had been in the Mekong Delta.

JM: Well, they'd been quite strong also in certain provinces in central Vietnam.

LC: Yes, and as you say the ones along the interior border particularly.

JM: Yes. The fourth trip that I made, my wife Nonie and I flew from Saigon to Hue where Tom Barnes was then the consul, stayed with him and his wife a night or two in Hue in Central Vietnam, the old imperial capital of Vietnam. Then Tom drove us over the Hai Van Pass from Hue to Da Nang. Again, that later became a very hairy area, but at that point there was no security problem, as I've indicated. I don't know whether we stayed a night in Da Nang or not. We may have. Anyway, my wife and I decided that I would fly back from Da Nang to Saigon while she took the fourteen-hour train trip alone from Da Nang down to Nha Trang in a coach with nothing but wooden seats, a long trip alone for her. I would fly back to Saigon, pick up our three children, fly up to Nha Trang, and we would have two or three days on the beach in Nha Trang with the family. That was what we did. We met in Nha Trang. My wife never liked airplanes, always avoided them if possible and she insisted that when we left Nha Trang we take the train from there back to Saigon, which was an overnight trip. I knew from my official duties that there had already been attacks on the train by the communists, but I acceded to my wife's desire. So my wife, three children and I took the overnight train back from Nha Trang to Saigon, fortunately without any incident. I mention these four trips because they were really the last trips of any length that we were able to make outside Saigon because by the end of 1960 the security situation had so deteriorated it was unsafe to travel outside Saigon at all and certainly with family.

LC: Wow. Those are remarkable journeys and the fact that most of them you did in cars is extraordinary.

JM: Yeah. Well, it's because while we were on the trip to central Vietnam in September of '60 I learned when we got back to Saigon that the communists had then begun to extend their guerilla activities to certain parts of central Vietnam. There were incidents that took place while we were in that area, although we didn't know about it until I got back to Saigon.

LC: That was the end of that.

JM: That was the end of travel, unfortunately. Now I'm going to switch back to the other problem, the non-communist dissidence problem. When I got back from Hue

and Da Nang, or I guess when I got back from Nha Trang, a Vietnamese friend of mine came to the house and said, "Where have you been? I've been trying desperately to get in touch with you because I was told that the South Vietnamese paratroopers were going to mount a coup against President Diem. I wanted to tell you about it." Actually, it didn't take place although he said he was certain it was going to, but it didn't take place at that time. When that coup actually did take place a month-and-a-half or two months later in early November he didn't forewarn me. So I had no advance information that it was going to take place at that point, but it was interesting that he who knew some of the coup leaders tried to warn me about it before, but maybe he didn't know about it afterwards either. Who knows?

LC: Interesting. Interesting

JM: Now I'm going to lead into this first coup attempt against the Diem government because this was an eye-opener of the extent to which dissidence had spread from the intellectual elite to the armed forces. Now, the intellectual elite could not really threaten Diem's power, but once the dissidence began to spread into the armed forces in South Vietnam as in so many developing countries, real power lies ultimately in the hands of the military. They can, if they coalesce, control the political situation. So this coup attempt in November of '60 was a real sign of the increasing danger in a political sense that the South Vietnamese government was confronting with respect to—really, not just non-communists but anti-communists. One of the reasons that the military were trying to mount a coup was that they were concerned that the Diem government was not handling the evolving security situation in a sense that would prevent the communists from taking over control of the country. Laura, I think you are interested in the way I saw the coup unfold the night that it did. Is that right?

LC: Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Anything you can tell us would be great.

JM: Well, I was sleeping at home and I got a call about 3:00AM—I think the call came from the embassy, I'm not sure—saying, "Are you aware of what's happening?" I said, "No. What's happening?" They said, "Well, the presidential palace is being attacked in Saigon." So I said, "Hold it a moment." I walked out onto our terrace on the second floor and I said, "I can both hear it and see the tracers flying through the sky. So you're quite right. Something definitely is happening."

LC: Where were you living, Joe?

JM: I lived probably six or eight blocks from the presidential palace. So when I saw this I immediately telephoned the ambassador, found that he had already been warned by Bill Colby, who lived only two houses from the entrance to the presidential palace. So he had a front-row seat, in effect. He had already been told by Colby about this attack that was taking place on the palace. I aroused the four other American diplomatic families in our little compound in their houses and assigned one of the officers to stay with my wife Nonie and children and gathered all the other families into our house, which was bigger, and I felt more secure than any of the smaller houses. I went to the ambassador's residence, which was two or three blocks away. I don't remember. I assume I drove but I can't remember whether I drove or walked over there because the ambassador wanted me to come over immediately. I got there and shortly thereafter the number two in the mission, the deputy chief of the mission, showed up also. I telephoned my principal contact in the Vietnamese government who was the secretary general of the foreign ministry, the number two in that ministry, to see what information he had. He said that he had already been in touch with the foreign minister, Vu Van Mao, whose house was also on the periphery of the presidential palace, not inside the walls of the presidential palace gardens, outside them but right near them but on the opposite side from Colby. So we were able to get information with respect to what was happening on that side. My friend, Pham Dang Lam, the number two in the foreign ministry, said that Mau had told him that these were members of the South Vietnamese paratroopers. We had not been absolutely sure up to that point who was actually mounting the coup. I remember my wife Nonie as soon as I reported to her in the bedroom what was happening, she said, "Oh, are the communists attacking here in Saigon?" she said apprehensively. I said, "No. I don't think so, because I don't think they have the strength to mount this attack," but we weren't sure. So the information we got—well, the ambassador asked me to telephone Mao after I had talked to Lam. The ambassador should have telephoned himself to Vu Van Mau from a protocol standpoint, but Durbrow, the ambassador, was so shell-shocked by this coup attempt that he really wasn't up to telephoning. So he asked me to telephone and I talked to Mau and got his confirmation that these were paratroopers and not communists. Meanwhile, I had asked the

communications people to get into the embassy. I telephoned the embassy and asked them to send a message to Washington, flash, which is the highest precedence of all which places a message on the president's desk in about ten minutes or it did at that point. I assume it still does. Saying that these were not communists, but they were South Vietnamese, to relieve any apprehensions in Washington that this might be a communist attempt to take over the government at that stage. Laura, I think that brings us to—it's not quite the end of an hour, but it brings us to a break.

LC: Well, let's go ahead and suspend things for today then.

JM: Right.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [14] of [57]
Date: February 18, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the eighteenth of February 2005. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech. I am speaking with the ambassador by telephone. You're in Nevada again this morning. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: I want to pick up our discussion and continue our discussion from a couple of weeks ago about the attempted coup in 1960. You gave us a very interesting description of what you recall about it. I have noted that your description jives exactly with the letter about the coup that you wrote to your parents, which has been published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series. Just as an aside, I would like to ask for those who might be interested in its inclusion in that series how that came about. Do you remember that?

JM: Yes, Laura. I'm glad you recall this letter. I had really, really forgotten about it and I'm very pleased to say that your recent perusal of it jives with what I have been telling you. Because of my age I sometimes wonder whether my memory—because I'm talking to you primarily on the basis of memory—whether my memory is—I know in some respects it's not as good at my age as it was in the past. So I feel very reassured by what you have just said. I can tell you how that came about.

LC: Okay.

JM: I was interviewed at some point, I think in the 1980s, by a representative of the History Office, or I should call it I guess the Historian's Office in the State Department about the events surrounding the coup in November of 1960. I don't know the fact by letter to my parents at that stage came up during this talk. Somehow it did and the representative from the Historian's Office who was interviewing me said that he would like to see it and asked if I would mind its being published in *Foreign Relations*, the official history of the State Department. I said no. So that's how it came about that it was published. He asked me and I suppose I must have had it. I was living in Italy then.

I suppose I must have had it in my files in Italy. So I had to go back and send it to him from Italy when I got back there.

LC: Now, were they good enough to provide you with a copy of *FRUS* once it was published?

JM: No. I had to buy each of those. They were about seventy-five dollars a copy so they're not cheap by any means.

LC: No. They're not.

JM: I have about half a dozen of the volumes dealing with Vietnam from '58 to '64, particularly the ones I suppose I'm interested in. Egocentric as so many people are, particularly the ones that dealt with my involvement in Vietnam over those six years.

LC: Well, certainly anyone who looks at those volumes will see your name there prominently. It's there very regularly as the drafter or the signer or the commenter on various cables and memoranda. But it's an interesting story. Let me ask a little bit about that interview just out of interest. Were you asked about other issues in addition to—

JM: Yes. I think there was a good deal of emphasis placed on what Ambassador Durbrow's role might have been in that coup, particularly since I believed that Lt. Gen. Sam Williams, who was the head of MAAG at the time, the Military Assistance Advisory Group, at the time of the coup attempt, indicated to the historians that he thought Durbrow was encouraging coup plotters in Vietnam against Diem. I responded very strongly to that, saying that I was absolutely convinced from Durbrow's reaction to the coup attempt that he had no foreknowledge whatsoever of the coup and was not attempting to encourage it. When I went from my residence to his after I got the news over the telephone that some armed strife had broken out, I found Durbrow virtually in a state of shock. One of the best proofs to me of that was when I suggested he call the foreign minister, Vu Van Mau, who lived on one side of the presidential palace compound to see what information he could give us. He asked me to do it instead. Normally, by protocol, he should have done so, but he was so shocked by this he was really virtually—he felt himself, I think, unable to talk to Mau. So I did so on his behalf. I think there was absolutely nothing to General Williams's allegations about Durbrow whatsoever. I might add that there was no foreknowledge within the whole U.S. mission set up in Vietnam about this coup attempt. We were getting reports, particularly CIA

reports, frequently about coup plotting among the Vietnamese. There were so many of them that one became extremely skeptical of all of them. We had no indication—I don't remember any CIA report that foreshadowed this particular coup attempt. I did indicate, I think, in my last interview with you that in September when I got back from a trip to central Vietnam, a Vietnamese friend of mine had come to the house and said that he had tried desperately to get hold of me while I was away because he had information that there was to be a coup attempt. I think he said by the paratroopers. I don't specifically recall it, but I think he did. But when the actual coup attempt did take place I had no forewarning whatsoever from him. As I say, there were so many—if anybody has experienced intelligence reporting, one tends to get so many reports from various intelligence sources that it is very difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. One begins to become very skeptical of the whole business. Which I think it's a relevant point to some extent in connection with what has happened in Iraq.

LC: And perhaps also with the 9/11 attack.

JM: With both of those very much. Look at what's happening with respect to North Korea now. I think the intelligence people are the first to say that one can't be absolutely sure of what is happening with respect to nuclear developments in North Vietnam. All you can do is try to come up with the best analysis and conclusions possible. It may or may not be correct.

LC: Joe, I want to ask about some of the telephone calls that the ambassador did make. Not the night that all the action was actually taking place in Saigon ,but over the next day and the next two days the ambassador made a number of calls as you know. These included several telephone calls with President Diem, I gather.

JM: Well, the only one that I recall that took place was—the coup attempt started during the night. I think it was November eleventh or twelfth, that night. The next afternoon at some point President Diem telephoned Ambassador Durbrow and asked whether he and the U.S. government were going to make a public statement of support of him. I think I may have discussed this the last time we talked. That's the only telephone—I urged Durbrow to play it carefully, not to commit himself one way or the other because we didn't know at that stage who was going to prevail. That's right. That's the way it went.

LC: Yes. That decision by the ambassador to try to stay a neutral course—

JM: Alienated Diem.

LC: It caused problems within the United States administration as well, is that true? Is that the case maybe later on?

JM: It may well have later because of the divisive reaction to what had taken place at that time may well have—I don't recall specifically that kind of reaction in the U.S., but it may well have.

LC: Did you, after the coup attempt had clearly failed, did you and perhaps others on the country team do an assessment or an analysis of the coup attempt, who had been behind it, its origins, and what was intended to be achieved?

JM: I'm sure we did, Laura. I don't specifically recollect. Let me back up at this stage from the coup attempt to a couple of months earlier because I did not cover that in our last discussion of this.

LC: Okay.

JM: We were carefully following the increasing dissension among non-communists in Vietnam with respect to the government of President Diem. That had been gradually developing, as I have indicated, over several years at that point, but that dissension was certainly rising in the summer of 1960. It had developed particularly among the intellectual elite, but it was beginning to develop also, as the intelligence reports we got indicated, among the South Vietnamese military as well. That means that it was beginning to become more, more dangerous. In September 1960 after much analysis and discussion, the embassy sent a telegram to Washington saying that we needed to urge Diem to change his approach to governance in order to try to deal with it. The military in South Vietnam, the increasing dissent there was because they felt that the government of Diem and Nhu was not pursuing properly the fight against the communists. That the way events were going with respect to the insurgency in Vietnam was increasingly unfavorable as far as the future was concerned and as far as the South Vietnamese government was concerned. So we developed a series of recommendations that an approach be made by the U.S. to the Diem government to make certain important changes in the way his government was operating. The most important was because of the rapidly increasing opposition within South Vietnam to the involvement of Mr. Ngo

Dinh Nhu, the brother of the president, and Madame Nhu in the way the government handled itself. We decided to recommend that Nhu and Madame be sent abroad as an ambassador somewhere. We also developed recommendations with respect to quite a number of other aspects of the government to try to broaden the base of the government by including certain of the intellectuals who were expressing dissent within the cabinet to increase the role of the National Assembly beyond the essentially puppet state in which it found itself at that time with Diem's authoritarian method of governing the country. A certain amount of freedom of the press to allow some criticism in the press of the government and a whole series of recommendations of that nature. So we sent the telegram to Washington. We got approval sent to this approach and we got word in mid-October that the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, as it was then called, Graham Parsons, was coming through the area, including Vietnam, shortly. It was decided that the best method of approach to Diem to show that this was not just a position of the embassy, but a position of the U.S. government was to have the subject raised by the ambassador when he took Parsons to call on Diem. That was what was done in mid-October. That approach was made. Diem categorically rejected sending Nhu and Madame abroad. On the other recommendations he simply stonewalled. He didn't indicate one way or another what his position was going to be. So this attempt to change Diem's method of governance, for both political reasons and to improve the efficacy of the government operations overall, particularly in the handling of the war with the communists. It failed. We didn't get any favorable results. Then shortly thereafter occurred this first coup attempt by certain elements in the South Vietnamese military. As you indicate, I'm sure we made a careful analysis of this attempt and sent it off to Washington. I do recall that because Diem did not seem to be making any change in his method of governance, despite the coup attempt by the military, as I recall by early December the ambassador made another approach to him under instructions from Washington to try to get him to change the way he was handling the governing of the country. We did drop in that approach any suggestion that Nhu or Madame be sent abroad as I recall, because Diem had simply categorically rejected it earlier. That attempt also failed and in my own case, whereas I had arrived in Vietnam as a hundred percent supporter of Diem and became increasingly concerned as the events developed, political

and military events developed in 1960 over the way he was governing, and was in favor of an approach to try to get him to make changes. I felt, when we made that recommendation in September ’60 and the approach in October, I felt that Diem should be kept, but that Nhu and his wife should go abroad. However, after the failed coup attempt and Diem’s refusal to make any change in his governing method, I began to conclude in my own mind that we could not win the war with Diem because his government was simply too inefficient to do so, too subject to manipulation of activities and reports to try to impress him favorably by the people who were working for him with very little attempt to give accurate and truthful reporting to him as to how developments were unfolding in the countryside. I had concluded in my mind by December that Diem would have to go, too. We did in December raise with Washington for the first time the embassy officially. I want to emphasize Durbrow was still very much a pro-Diem man. So it was very difficult to convince him to take these actions. But in December we raised in an embassy cable for the first time that it might become necessary to begin to consider from the U.S. standpoint alternative leadership in Vietnam. That was the first time that was officially raised by the embassy with Washington.

LC: Joe, can you give us a sense of how the ambassador reacted and how this suggestion eventually did go forward from the embassy?

JM: Well, as I say, for a long time Durbrow would brook no official action to try to change Diem’s major approach to governance. Other issues he did approach Diem, for example on relations with Cambodia, to try to get him to change with matters of lesser importance, particularly in the security field, but not on this major question until first in [October] and then again in December the issues were raised. Both times Diem simply stonewalled and paid no real heed to our recommendations. So there was really no change in his method of governance. It took major effort to change Durbrow’s views but as events unfolded he was flexible enough that he finally did begin to make some changes and agree to send these recommendations on. Otherwise, since he was the ambassador they would not have been sent to Washington unless he finally became convinced in his own mind.

LC: Yes, absolutely.

JM: But as I indicated, during the coup attempt he was still so much pro-Diem he

was almost shell-shocked by the fact of the coup attempt. That was his initial reaction to it.

LC: So the time period that you're nailing down here is a very important one for your own thinking and for the ambassador's, although he may have been on a slightly different trajectory than yours.

JM: Right.

LC: Is this period between say, September 1960 and early December 1960.

JM: Right.

LC: Let me ask about the role of the discussions which had been developing certainly during 1960 about counter-insurgency and increasing the U.S. effort to train on counter-insurgency.

JM: That's the very point I wanted to proceed on.

LC: Well, take it away, Joe.

JM: Meanwhile, probably starting in September but certainly in October, the ambassador directed that all aspects of the country team, the embassy, the Military Assistance Advisory Group, the AID mission, CIA station, and the USIS office get together and develop a recommended counter-insurgency plan for the Vietnamese government because we were so increasingly concerned as to the adverse developments in that field. The increasing activities of the communists and particularly the spread of those activities from the Mekong Delta to central Vietnam, which I think I indicated. We first began to observe this development in September 1960. So a country team subcommittee was appointed by the ambassador, of which I was the chairman, to develop this counter-insurgency plan. Actually it was a very harmonious operation. We had quite a number of sessions. Much of the drafting work was done by the military representative, Maj. Kurtz Miller. We had made considerable progress in developing that recommended counter-insurgency plan when the coup attempt came. So activity was suspended then for a number of weeks but resumed at the ambassador's direction in December. The plan was finalized, sent off to Washington, and the new administration of President Kennedy took it up, I think, very quickly after his inauguration. Because very soon after he was inaugurated we received a telegram from the Department of State saying that the counter-insurgency plan that had been submitted had been approved, quote "at the highest level,"

close quote. That was the, shall I say, the euphemism to indicate that the president himself had approved it. We were directed to proceed to present it to the Vietnamese government, to Diem's government, hoping that he would adopt many of the major proposals in it. It dealt primarily with military activities, but also with political, economic, and other activities as well. So the first thing that we had to do then to a very long document was to shorten it somewhat for presentation to the Vietnamese government and translate it from English into French. This took some time, but finally by March we were ready to present it. Durbrow, the ambassador, got an appointment with Diem, told him about the document, and may have even probably presented the French version of it to Diem. It was agreed between Durbrow and Diem that it would be presented in detail with a long verbal briefing by me to Thuan, Nguyen Dinh Thuan, who was the number three official in the government. He was in effect the chief of staff to the presidency, to President Diem, and concurrently minister of defense. So I had daily meetings with Thuan over a period of about a week, each lasting an hour or two, in which I discussed in detail the recommendations in this plan. Thuan and I had a number of discussions back and forth during those sessions. I think this was the most comprehensive negotiation or discussion in French I had ever had up to that stage in my career with a foreign government. One of the things that emerged during these meetings with Thuan was something which proved to be extremely important to my own thinking as the events developed over future months and years. Thuan said to me that the decision by peasants in the countryside, who were certainly the majority of the population in South Vietnam, that peasants were bound to have their ultimate decision in the kind of situation we were involved in, communists versus non-communists, that their ultimate decision would depend upon survival of themselves and their families. That whoever could better protect their lives and those of their families would be the side that they would opt for. So that meant that uppermost in dealing with the insurgency was effective military security measures because that's what ultimately determined the way the population in the countryside would opt. I came to believe this very much myself. As I say, events developed over the years and I think this is very important for all those in the U.S. and elsewhere who emphasize the winning of hearts and minds in order to prevail in an insurgency situation through political measures, economic measures, social measures,

and so forth. While I don't say these are not important, the ultimate decision by the bulk of the population, the peasants in the countryside in South Vietnam, would depend upon who was going to provide better protection for them. As events developed in South Vietnam over the years in the war, I think this was proven completely correct. One could see which way the peasants were swinging according to who seemed to be the stronger, who would prevail in the end. That, I think, is an extremely important analytical conclusion not only in the Vietnam situation but in all situations involving an insurgency.

LC: Joe, would you mind if I asked you some questions about the formation and drafting of the report?

JM: No. Not at all.

LC: Tell me a little bit if you would about Major Miller. Do you remember much about him?

JM: Oh, yes. As I indicated, I worked very closely with him in this context. I think he was in probably the planning section of MAAG. I can't recall specifically, but he was the one designated by General Williams as the chief MAAG representative on this subcommittee. He was a very pleasant, intelligent, knowledgeable individual who did yeoman work on this report. I had developed very high regard for him. We had very cordial relations. I thought he did a very fine job. Subsequently, when I was in Laos from 1965 to 1968, Kurtz Miller turned up about midway through my tour as the American defense attaché to Laos, which was an extremely important position. Because all American military activities which affected Laos, and a number of them of course did, had to be coordinated by the defense attaché with the Lao armed forces in order to make sure there was no crossing of wires. Hopefully no dropping of bombs, for example, on a Lao military unit. So this was an extremely important function of the defense attaché, a much more important one than defense attachés normally have. So Kurtz Miller did occupy that job. I, as AID mission director in Laos, also had close contact with him during this phase of my career.

LC: Now how closely did the MAAG position on what this counter-insurgency recommendation plan should look like, how closely did that match what you and the embassy had on it?

JM: Well, I think since we incorporated in this counter-insurgency plan in the

political sphere many of the recommendations we had been pursuing with the Vietnamese government, leaving out the transfer of Nhu and his wife abroad, ultimately they were accepted by the MAAG because it was a unanimously agreed document. In the military sphere there was great emphasis on handling the security situation in Vietnam as an anti-guerilla war at that stage, and not so much emphasis on conventional training of the Vietnamese as there had been in the past by the MAAG. The most important recommendations in the security sphere were the establishment of a central intelligence organization in Vietnam to ensure that all intelligence that came in about communist attacks in the countryside was received and acted upon immediately by a central organization rather than by diffusion of intelligence agencies as had existed in the Vietnamese government. The second major recommendation was unity of command in the military sphere. Unfortunately, Diem and Nhu, partly because of their mistrust of the military from a coup standpoint, tried to handle these things, did handle these things directly often with commanders in the field with those who they felt were loyal. So that there was not unity of command and there wasn't the kind of instantaneous response which should have been handled and taken place through a central intelligence organization, diffusing this intelligence and getting the military to react upon it immediately. The reason, of course, that as I've just indicated, that Diem and Nhu were operating the way they did with respect to the military was because they mistrusted many of the officers because of fears of a coup against them. The fact that the security situation was steadily worsening in the communists' favor meant that the military became increasingly anti-Diem. So you were in a situation of a dilemma. Diem was afraid of the military and the military were increasingly—well, the senior military officers were increasingly opposed to the Diem government because of the way the war against the communists was going. Ultimately, of course, it would have been I think in Diem and Nhu's—I'm convinced it would have been in Diem and Nhu's interest to have worked closely with the military because eventually they were overthrown by the military. Their fears were confirmed but because the security situation was going so badly and also because, of course, the Buddhist crisis developed in 1963, part of the political situation, that Diem and Nhu had not accepted our political recommendations earlier and part of the aftermath of that was the development of the Buddhist crisis in '63. So my own feeling is

if they had taken the risks that we recognized were involved in the approach we were recommending to them, they might well have survived, whereas they didn't because of the method of governance and operations in the political sphere which they adhered to.

LC: During 1960, during the summer of 1960 a number of the cables that the ambassador sent to Washington talked about President Diem asking for a stepped-up program. Ambassador Durbrow used that term a number of times, a stepped-up program of counter-insurgency training. Do you think that the South Vietnamese government, either President Diem or his officials, had an idea that the U.S. country team was working on this kind of plan? Were they aware? Do you have any notion of that?

JM: I don't think they were. I have no information that they were aware until we officially presented the plan. They knew because of the MAAG and the interest that the embassy had long taken in the security situation that we were constantly following that. I don't think they had any indication before the plan was developed that we were actually engaged in that, but this was a subject of constant discussion with the military by both the embassy and the MAAG.

LC: Now, can you characterize or shed any light on General Williams's position on the whole shift of emphasis as it unfolded in late 1960?

JM: Yeah. I'll make a couple of observations on General Williams's position and attitude. He was—I would call him a one thousand percent supporter of Diem. He felt, I think, that Diem could do no wrong whatsoever. He and the ambassador for a long time were very much in agreement on that. As I indicated, the ambassador began to change, much more than Williams. I don't think Williams ever changed in his assessment of Diem. The biggest difference between the ambassador and Williams, not just in 1960 but even somewhat earlier, and it became more acute in 1960, was over the method of training the South Vietnamese armed forces. Williams was training them to deal with conventional warfare. Durbrow began to think, and this position of his became increasingly solidified, that we should be training them at that stage to deal with guerilla warfare. Williams and Durbrow often went to battle over this. So that was a real difference between the two of them.

LC: General Williams, was he not on his way out?

JM: He left about a month before Durbrow did in the spring of 1961. We could

go into that now, Laura, a bit if you would like.

LC: It's up to you, Joe. If you feel up to it we can. Sure.

JM: Sure. We can go into that a bit. As far as I know, Williams was not recalled in any respect by the Pentagon. I think it was simply an expiration of his normal tour of duty in Vietnam. He was replaced by another lieutenant general, McGarr. So he left in April of [1961]. Durbrow was replaced in May by Frederick Nolting as ambassador. The Kennedy administration had come in, of course. In January he was inaugurated. I think there were several things that led to Durbrow's replacement. One is he had been there about four years, which is a fairly lengthy period for an ambassador to be assigned. That may have been a factor, but the other factors I think which led to his being replaced, Kennedy sent Maj. Gen. Edward Lansdale out in, I think, January or February to Vietnam to discuss the situation and come up with recommendations. Lansdale was also a hundred percent supporter of Diem. By that point, Diem was quite soured on Durbrow for various reasons, including what Durbrow was pushing him on relations with Cambodia and, of course, because of the way the answer Durbrow gave during that telephone call while the coup was going on in November and because Durbrow was pushing him to make major changes in the political sphere and his method of governance. I'm sure Lansdale made recommendations when he came, which were critical of Durbrow. Then in March of '61, Joseph Alsop, the well-known columnist, came to Vietnam. Did I mention this to you before? I think maybe I did.

LC: Well, we talked about the Alsops generally and where you had met them in Washington.

JM: Anyway, Alsop stayed with the ambassador for about a week, I think. Alsop you know, was very close to Kennedy, went back to Washington, extremely critical of Durbrow and very much pro-Diem. I think these two reports probably influenced Kennedy to proceed to replace Durbrow as ambassador. So Durbrow left in early May.

LC: Joe, I wonder if you recall any rumors or was there any consideration given as far as you know to go appointing General Lansdale as the ambassador?

JM: I think there—Laura, I wasn't aware of it at the time but I think there are some indications in the *Foreign Relations*, the official history of the State Department, that there was some consideration of that. You probably have read that yourself.

LC: I just wondered if that—

JM: At least I wasn't aware of it. I found a number of things, of course, in *Foreign Relations* about activities in Washington that certainly I wasn't aware of and I suspect some other people in the field were not aware of, too.

LC: Did you have anything to do with Lansdale when he was there? I think it was in January of 1961.

JM: Yes. I think we probably talked at some stage, but I can't specifically recall that. I do know from *Foreign Relations* that he was critical of me when he got back to Washington, saying that I was anti-the-war in Vietnam. I was anti-war and therefore anti-Diem and that, in effect, I should be replaced. That's the conclusion I drew from some of the things that appeared in *Foreign Relations* so he knew that I was very critical of Diem.

LC: Well, if he wanted to be ambassador and if he wanted to get rid of you it wasn't a very good time for General Lansdale.

JM: For me certainly it would not have been. Well, I concluded that, Laura, when I read *Foreign Relations*, but that would not have helped my career whatsoever, but I was not aware of that at the time at all.

LC: Well, he did not get his way in any event.

JM: Right, exactly.

LC: Joe, let's take a break.

JM: I think it's very interesting—

LC: Oh, okay.

JM: It's very interesting that he was not appointed ambassador there.

LC: Yes, it is.

JM: I think there was some indication in *Foreign Relations* to why Kennedy ultimately decided, but that's the only thing I know about that.

LC: Okay. Well, let's take a break there, Joe.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [15] of [57]
Date: February 25, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the twenty-fifth of February 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech and the ambassador is at home in Nevada. Good afternoon, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good afternoon, Laura.

LC: Thank you for continuing with us. I want to ask a little bit more, if I can, about the country team that developed the counter-insurgency report. We mentioned this and reviewed it at a bit of length last time.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, I wonder if you can stand back a little bit from Saigon and from the work you were doing there and if in doing so you have any observations that you might offer about other counter-insurgency efforts made by the West in the post-war period and whether that had any impact at all on your thinking when you were in Saigon.

JM: Laura, let's first look at the Greek Civil War situation from 1946 to 1948. I cannot say at all if that had any impact on our thinking at that stage. Later, it has had a very substantial effect on my own thinking in strategic terms, and I'll explain what I mean. In 1960, developments in Laos were being closely followed—in '60 and '61—by the U.S. government. You remember that I think it was in August of '60 there was a—let me make sure I get this straight now. That was when the neutralist Kong Le coup took place against the rightist government in Vientiane. That resulted in some open warfare in Laos with three parties involved, the communists, that is the Pathet Lao backed by the North Vietnamese communists, the neutralists under Souvanna Phouma with young Kong Le as the military figure, and the rightists who were headed by Phoui Sananikone as the chief political figure with General Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum. Boun Oum, I should say, was also an important political figure, General Phoumi as the important military figure. We were backing the rightists. By '61, mid-'61, our government in Washington, then President Kennedy, was faced with the decision as to whether to put some U.S. forces into Laos to prevent the rightists from being completely overrun by the

communists and the neutralists. The neutralists were then working closely with the communists. Now I'm going to back up a little. No, I'm not going to back up. What I'll say right now is that when President Kennedy raised his proposal to introduce as I recall about sixteen thousand U.S. military forces into Laos with the congressional leadership, the Speaker of the House, the veteran speaker Sam Rayburn replied, "If you did not put U.S. forces into Cuba at the time of the Bay of Pigs to support that invasion and throw out the communist government of Castro in a country that was only ninety miles off the coast of Florida, I cannot support you for putting U.S. forces ten thousand miles away into Laos." Without the very important support of Rayburn, Kennedy was stymied in his proposal to put U.S. forces into Laos because of the decision, in my view erroneous, that he made at the time of the Bay of Pigs, which is very early in his administration. He was a man without real experience in foreign policy. Eisenhower's last words to Kennedy in January of '61 when he turned the presidency over to Kennedy was that Laos is the strategic key to Southeast Asia. In other words, the fate of both Vietnam and Thailand depend upon what is done in Laos, as one can see by looking. Eisenhower was a man of tremendous military experience, whose knowledge and views of strategy one can lend an immense amount of credence to, whereas Kennedy had had no real experience in that field before. This precedent of not introducing U.S. forces into Cuba, when the Laos crisis arose, proved Kennedy's undoing as far as Laos. Then he had to look for a new policy with respect to Laos and that's when he, with Averell Harriman's urging, turned to a Geneva conference to, quote "neutralize" close quote, Laos. That was the agreement that was ultimately reached, spurious as far as the North Vietnamese were concerned because they consistently violated the neutrality of Laos to introduce their troops and material into South Vietnam over the next fifteen years. They were able to do it with virtual impunity. We did bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail going down through southern Laos as the route of infiltration, but bombing could not sufficiently affect this infiltration of men and material so as to influence the outcome of the war in Vietnam. The strategy the U.S. followed in the war of Vietnam was one of attrition, the same strategy really, which had been used during World War II. In other words, if we were able to eliminate enough of the forces of the enemy we would eventually force the enemy to negotiate or give up. But that strategy was fundamentally undermined by the neutrality of Laos,

which allowed, in effect, the unpunished infiltration of North Vietnamese forces and material through southern Laos. In my view, because our government always respected—our government, I will say that was Kennedy and Johnson—always respected this so-called neutralization of Laos. We could never hope to make our strategy prevail in that war. So looking back in retrospect, the war was impossible to win from the beginning because looking at the geography of South Vietnam, the very long border which they had to defend, adjacent to Laos and Cambodia, where the enemy could, at its own choice, penetrate into South Vietnam with the forces it had infiltrated—it was hopeless for South Vietnam to prevail even with our assistance. As we know, we were unable to prevail against them because there was this fundamental defect in strategy. That's the reason I like to say that the most important thing in any armed conflict is the broad political-military strategy which is adopted by our country or any other in such a conflict. So, Laura, I really dealt more with Laos than I have with Greece, but I will say Greece is relevant in this respect.

LC: Yes.

JM: Unfortunately, I think this goes to the fact that there's very little long historical memory in the U.S. government. In Greece we likewise were unable to turn around that conflict between the Greek communists and the Greek government in our favor until Tito in Yugoslavia in 1948 defected from the Stalinist Russia camp and closed his border to the infiltration of men and supplies to the communists in Greece and to the use of Yugoslav territory as a sanctuary. Until that decision was made it was impossible to win the civil war in Greece. So there was a direct analogy in my view there between Yugoslav territory in the Greek Civil War and Lao territory in the war in Vietnam. I think fundamentally, the fundamental error was Kennedy's with respect to Cuba. I think that's also important in another respect. Because Kennedy didn't back up the invasion of Cuba with U.S. forces we were ultimately confronted in October of 1962 by what I consider the gravest crisis in the history of the United States since our own civil war. That was, of course, the attempt by Russia to install nuclear missiles in Cuba. Had what Kennedy campaigned on in 1960, that there was a missile gap between us and Russia, had that been true when it turned out it was not true, had that been true I think it is very questionable. I think it's unlikely the Russians would have backed down when we

confronted them over the installation of missiles when we said, “Your ships have to stop and turn back.” I think if they had had superiority in missiles Khrushchev would not have backed down at that stage. In my view, we should never have been subjected to this terrible crisis because if what Kennedy had campaigned on have been true I think our country would have suffered immensely.

LC: Is there a general observation that you would make? For example, would you agree that relying on neutrality is a false and dangerous step for U.S. foreign policy in general as a block to expansionist, call it whatever, communism or tyranny?

JM: Laura, my answer to that would be probably in most cases yes. I would hesitate to make an absolutely blanket statement. The reason I do that, I look at the situation in Korea today. We are faced with an extremely difficult problem in Korea. The military option, while I wouldn’t close it off, is one that is awfully hard to resort to there. First, because of the great vulnerability of Seoul, the capital of South Vietnam (Korea), to military action from North Vietnam (Korea) because of its proximity to the North Vietnamese (Korean) territory. Second because both South Korea and China are extremely worried that if anything is done to upset the communist regime in North Vietnam (Korea) there may be massive immigration by refugees from North Korea into South Korea and China, upsetting their own economic development. We all know that West Germany has had immense trouble absorbing the much smaller population of East Germany, despite the enormous wealth of West Germany. The South Koreans and I think the Chinese both look at that situation and say, “We don’t want that.” It still hasn’t been resolved satisfactorily in Germany in the economic sense, as we know. So both the South Koreans and the Chinese are terribly concerned that military action against North Korea might result in a massive outflow of people from North Vietnam (Korea) to their great economic detriment. I think both those factors limit the possibility of the military option in North Vietnam (Korea), plus the fact that I don’t think we really know where all the nuclear facilities are in North Vietnam (Korea).

LC: North Korea.

JM: North Korea, excuse me.

LC: Sure. Yep. That’s fine.

JM: So that means that we have to consider what other possibilities may be

resorted to from a policy standpoint. What we're doing, of course, is trying to bring pressure through the six-power multilateral talks on North Korea. If those talks do not succeed in resolving the nuclear question, then unless we do resort to a very unsatisfactory military option, I say I wouldn't foreclose it, but I think it is a very, very difficult one to consider. The only policy possibility that I see is to try to quarantine the exportation of nuclear and other materials related to weapons of mass destruction from North Korea to other sources, including terrorists. The only way you can mount an effective quarantine is by having the cooperation of China. We can do it by water with our facilities and those of other countries. As a matter of fact, I think we're already doing it to a certain degree. We can probably do it by air, but ground transportation we couldn't possibly do it without the cooperation of China because most of the North Korean northern border is adjacent to China, a little bit of it to Russia. So we really need the cooperation of both those countries if we are ever to have any reasonable chance of a successful quarantine.

LC: Joe, just while we're on this topic can you offer any observations on the current state of U.S.-Chinese relations?

JM: Well, I would say this. I would say first, Laura, that I think that the western Europeans, the European Union, is being enormously unhelpful in raising at this particular stage the question of the lifting of its arms embargo to China. I say that because we are bound to oppose that. It would be much better if in the state of our dependence on Chinese cooperation with respect to Korea, which I just pointed out I think we need very much, if we didn't have to go public on this issue, which affects the security of Taiwan. I think we're going to have to do it even more so in the future because it doesn't look as though the European Union is going to back down. So I think this is going to be a real issue.

LC: Right. They're certainly drawing us to the public forum in having to make our own case about arms embargo.

JM: It's too bad to have to do all of this publicly, to put that kind of public pressure on China when we're dependent on their cooperation. On the other hand, I think we also have certain pressures which we can bring on China to counter to some extent the adverse impact of what I've just mentioned is happening with respect to Europe. That is

I think that if North Korea has actually developed nuclear weapons there is a great possibility and I think even a probability that South Korea will go the same nuclear route. I think Japan will also. That I'm sure China does not want at all. I don't think it would be particularly in our interest, but you don't talk about this publicly obviously. I should think this is a point that we bring up privately with the Chinese. "Look, if you don't keep putting pressure on North Korea to do something about its nuclear weapons, you're going to be faced with a nuclear Japan and possibly even a nuclear Taiwan." South Korea and Japan, I think, would almost certainly go sooner or later. I think sooner rather than later nuclear and I think Taiwan might. So that's a pressure point that we can bring up in reverse. Of course, we can also always privately indicate, "Look, if you're not prepared to cooperate on North Korea we may have to step up our assistance to Taiwan over the Taiwan Straits question."

LC: Right, which has been the sort of central chip in the relationship between the two long before diplomatic relations were restored.

JM: Right. Then also, I think even though we recognize that the fact that the military option against North Korea is also circumscribed by the history of the Korean War of the 1950s when the Chinese intervened because they didn't want American forces up against their frontier, I think probably justified security reasons. I think that factor would still operate to deter our resort to the military option, but on the other hand if we don't give up that option, and I don't think we will publicly—just as Bush has made it clear we're not giving up that option with respect to Iran—then the Chinese are put in a difficult position. Because if we are forced to resort to the military option against North Korea we can say to them, "Look, that's"—and there is this massive migration from North Korea into China—"your great emphasis in the present time on economic development is going to be seriously adversely affected." So I think there are pressure points to the advantage of the Chinese, but also to the U.S. advantage in the quest of U.S.-Chinese relations. A difficult one, but not impossible in my view at all.

LC: But it underscores the interrelatedness of all of the security of all of the countries.

JM: Exactly. Now, Laura, you raised the question of neutralization, and neutrality and neutralization. I hold in the back of my mind as the ultimate desirable

solution to the Korean peninsula problem the example of Belgium in 1839 when Belgian neutrality was guaranteed by all of the principal powers interested in Belgium in Europe. Belgium was in as important a geographic position with respect to all the major powers of Western Europe then as the Korean peninsula stands today with respect to Japan, Russia, China, and the United States. So I think the ultimate desirable solution from the standpoint of all of these major powers may be the neutralization of Korea, similar to what was done with respect to Belgium in 1839. You can't reach this what I think desirable solution as long as the communist regime exists in North Korea because it can't be trusted in any way. I think the fact that there is increasing opposition within South Korea to U.S. policy may be a sign that the neutralization certainly might be acceptable to South Korea at some time in the future, but it cannot be resorted to as long as the communist regime exists in North Vietnam. I would say I don't exclude neutrality or neutralization in all situations. I think in the Korean situation it may be the ultimate solution.

LC: Do you think the much-reformed Chinese Communist Party leadership would accept the rollback as it were of communism in North Korea on that peninsula?

JM: I would think so because I think in the ultimate analysis the Chinese are more concerned with the security of China than with any other single item. I think a neutral Korea, of the entire peninsula, would be very much in their interest.

LC: Particularly if there was, as you say, a quadripartite agreement that included Japan.

JM: Exactly. Exactly.

LC: Well, this points out, I think, the importance of injecting some historical memory into diplomacy.

JM: Exactly. Not just the fact that we lost the war in Vietnam eventually because we forgot all about the Greek Civil War precedent of the use of contiguous territory for infiltration and as a sanctuary.

LC: Joe, can you say anything about the British experience in Malaya, moving to a different—

JM: Yes, I'll be glad to, Laura. I'm not sure that in 1960 we—well, I'll say this. I don't think we related it sufficiently to the Vietnamese situation as much as

subsequently indicated was desirable. The example of the British success against the guerillas in Malaya and the strategy they used certainly became important in Vietnam in 1962 when Brig. Robert Thompson, who had been very influential in this strategy in Malaya, came to Vietnam as an advisor to the Diem government. I'll get to that later.

LC: Sure.

JM: The South Vietnamese government, as a result of his advice, adopted the Strategic Hamlet Program approach, which I'll get into that later. In concept it could have been good, but it wasn't executed in the correct way.

LC: Now for someone listening who would just want your sort of overview of the situation in Malaya, can you give a broad-brush discussion of the Malayan Communist Party and its activities and then the British response?

JM: Yes. As I recall, Laura, I'm not absolutely sure of these dates, but I think it's correct. I think the situation in Malaya developed into pretty full-scale guerilla warfare by 1952, I believe.

LC: Oh, absolutely. Mm-hmm.

JM: The guerilla movement there was essentially a movement among the Chinese in Malaya. The Chinese amount to, I think, something between thirty and forty percent of the total population of Malaya. The majority being Malays, the second biggest group being the Chinese, and the third Indians, although I think the Indians are much more significant in Singapore than they are in Malaya proper. But it was the Chinese who mounted the guerilla opposition to the British in Malaya, supported by the communist government in Peking. That war lasted as I recall about six years. By 1958 it was resolved successfully. The British had succeeded over a period of several years in finally mastering this war. They did it by adopting what they called an "ink spot approach." They would take secure areas in Malaya as the heart of their anti-guerilla approach and ensure that the people in those secure areas were protected against attacks and then gradually extend security out over adjacent areas, which were at least partially under the control of the guerillas. This approach gradually succeeded through a combination of military measures, police measures, economic measures, and political ones. It was a broad, comprehensive approach, very difficult to coordinate effectively, but the British were able to do it. Part of their success, I think, could probably be attributed to the fact

that the Malays did not align themselves at all with the guerillas. It was a minority Chinese guerilla development, but very effective for a long time. The British were hard put to it but eventually succeeded in mastering it.

LC: So the ethnic divisions within Malaya certainly played a part and you've pointed to that. What about the actual ink spot strategy? Can you say any more about that at all?

JM: Well, Laura, that's the approach, of course, which Brigadier Thompson recommended in Vietnam when he came. There was certainly a great deal to be said for it. Diem and Nhu did adopt it in theory, but as I indicated the way they tried to carry it out was not the correct one at all. It eventually did not succeed there.

LC: What about—and again switching tack a little bit, what about the American counter-insurgency success in the Philippines? Did that have a role to play in the thinking in '60 and '61?

JM: I don't think that had any—I don't recall its coming up, particularly during our development of the counter-insurgency plan. Laura, I'll say this. In the field where you're developing a plan like this, one does not have access to all of these earlier developments as one should in Washington. I'm not saying this to be giving this as an excuse but obviously we don't have the files, or we don't necessarily have the personnel who have had that kind of experience. I think all the things you're raising are relevant and eventually came to bear, except for the Greek Civil War one, on our handling of the situation in Vietnam. As of 1960, I wouldn't say that they affected the plan particularly. Laura, as the head of the committee that developed that plan, I'll be the first one to say that it certainly was inadequate as far as subsequent developments were concerned. It took the U.S. about six to seven years from 196—it was by '67 that we really began to develop an effective counter-insurgency plan. So I won't defend this completely, but I'll say in part it took the whole U.S. government seven years to reach an effective one.

LC: Now, Joe, can I just ask you—and we're fast-forwarding here—but can I just ask you to name, and I think I know what you mean, but can I ask you to say what happened in '67?

JM: One of the great problems over all the years in trying to develop an effective counter-insurgency approach was to get maximum effective coordination among the

various U.S. agencies operating in Vietnam and, of course, the kind of cooperation and interweaving, which was ultimately necessary with the Vietnamese government. For many years our Defense Department, our military, resisted anything in the way of coordination which they thought would in any way impinge upon their predominantly military role. It took, and I think will always take, the White House—Laura, are you hearing me?

LC: Yes, absolutely, Joe. Yes.

JM: Excuse me?

LC: Yes, Joe. Go ahead.

JM: Oh, I think my telephone slipped from my ear.

LC: Oh, okay. That's all right.

JM: It ultimately takes the White House to bring effective control, effective coordination within the U.S. government. What happened in 1967 within the White House—Robert Komer was chosen by Lyndon Johnson as the chief coordinator within the White House of our Vietnam policy and he had the hundred percent backing of [Johnson]. With that kind of presidential backing, Komer was able to develop the kind of approach at the Washington level, which led to effective coordination among all the U.S. departments in counterinsurgency. Then after he developed it in Washington, again with Johnson's one-thousand-percent backing, he went out to Vietnam and headed the execution of this program. The unique way in which the coordination was ensured within Vietnam was that Komer was named one of two deputies to the commanding general in Vietnam. The commanding general then was Westmoreland. Komer became his duputy for pacification. A deputy was also named for conventional military operations. Komer, because of the thorough backing of the White House, was able to get the kind of coordination that was needed. What ultimately happened was that about six thousand U.S. personnel were assigned to Komer for pacification to work with the South Vietnamese on it. The majority of them were military, but they responded only to Komer and through Komer to the commanding general. They were not part of the regular military operation. So Komer was able to get very good military personnel who were devoted solely to the question of pacification. Komer also had assigned to him personnel from the State Department, from the AID mission, from the U.S. Information Service and

from CIA. He had complete control over these people. Finally, we did have an effective counter-insurgency program in South Vietnam. Komer left in late 1968, succeeded by Bill Colby, who eventually became the director of CIA. Colby was equally effective in directing and carrying out the program for pacification. As Colby pointed out in one of his books, by 1970 or '71 the guerilla war had been won in South Vietnam. What we eventually did was to lose on a conventional basis. The guerilla war, which earlier had been paramount for much of the '60s, and which we were not winning until we got this effective counter-insurgency plan was eventually won by ['71]. There is another key factor, too, that I'll say, Laura. That is that the change from General Westmoreland as the commanding general to General Abrams in 1968 was another key factor in the eventual success in the guerilla war. Abrams attached more importance to us, gave stronger backing to the anti-guerilla war than had been true under Westmoreland who had felt more in conventional military terms. So that was another very significant factor. In my view, I think Abrams proved to be a much more effective general in the Vietnam context than Westmoreland did.

LC: Joe, those are all fascinating insights. I'll certainly come back and talk to you about those in more depth as we go forward, as you know.

JM: I would imagine I would generate a considerable amount of controversy with these views of certain people.

LC: Probably, but that's okay. You can get away with it. The later British influence on Diem is something that I think you saw at the end of your time in this assignment.

JM: That's right.

LC: We'll talk about that as well. Coming back to the team that drafted the plan, we spoke before about the military input. You gave some observations about General Williams and about General McGarr who followed him. I wonder if you can say anything of what you feel you could say about the Central Intelligence Agency's participation on the drafting committee and what their position was apropos of the State Department's position which you've outlined, and the military position which you've also outlined in our earlier session?

JM: Laura, as I recall we worked harmoniously with the CIA representative. Bill

Colby by that time was the head of the CIA station in Saigon. I'm not sure I remember who his representative was on that committee. I don't think Bill—he may have attended a session or two, but I think he had somebody else attend the more frequent sessions we had. I don't think there was any great problem at all in the CIA approach. As a matter of fact, one of the principal recommendations which emerged from the counter-insurgency plan was the establishment by the Vietnamese government of a central intelligence organization, which we considered one of the basic keys to an effective counter-guerilla approach. That idea was certainly—I think it emerged from the CIA people and was certainly accepted by the rest of us as a key aspect of the plan.

LC: Was there any discussion or can you pitch in anything about the appreciation of this stage of the Can Lao party, which at this point was still sort of underground?

JM: The whole question of the Can Lao party was very much a preoccupation of Ambassador Durbrow during the time he was there. Even before '59, before I arrived in Vietnam I know that Durbrow was disturbed over Ngo Dinh Nhu's command of this secret party modeled more or less on the Kuomintang in China and to a degree modeled also on communist party organizational approaches.

LC: What can you tell us in general terms about the Can Lao party for someone who didn't have a lot of information about it?

JM: Well, Laura, it was Nhu's baby. It was his personal idea, I think, to establish this party. He certainly ran it, ran it completely. Diem, I'm sure, knew everything that was going on in it. Nhu had a very peculiar political philosophy. I'm trying to recall, something personalism. I can't remember what.

LC: Yes. I think that's right.

JM: Which was always very difficult for any of us Westerners to understand, I think also for most Vietnamese. It was convoluted, partly secret and not very practical in the view of most of us. Important figures in the Can Lao party under Nhu were felt to be by us Americans, felt to be the head of the secret police Tuyen, T-U-Y-E-N. I think it's Tran Kim Tuyen. He was considered one of the key figures in Nhu's approach. Another one during the earlier years was the head of the labor movement, Tran Quoc Buu. Certain military officers were considered to be key members of the party. We did not always know, I think, who they were. Eventually one who headed the Special Forces in

1963. I don't remember his name now. He was killed during the coup in October, I think. He certainly was a key member of it. Also, I think some members of the National Assembly. Now, some of these people I came to know extremely well. Some sooner or later, I think, became disillusioned. Both my wife and I came to know Tran Quoc Buu extremely well while we were there and had some contact with him up until and certainly through 1969. He became, I think, disillusioned with the whole idea. Tran Quoc Buu was an enigmatic figure who, like so many Vietnamese, talked in elliptical terms. You had to know how to talk to, deal with, and understand the Vietnamese of this kind of person—very typical of the Vietnamese personality. Very often they didn't talk directly at all, but if you had enough experience you knew what they were trying to intimate to you, but relaying this to someone in Washington who said, "Is this absolutely the case? Are you absolutely sure?" Well, you'd say, "Yes. I'm ninety-eight percent sure," but if you're dealing with somebody elliptically there's always at least a two percent reservation. Another figure, Tuyen, the head of the secret police who was somebody with whom, of course, CIA collaborated extremely closely. In the stream of CIA reports which used to cross my desk, many of them—you know what raw intelligence material is like, whether it's being fed into the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), CIA or whatever. You get all kinds of reports. Well, Tuyen sounded like a real monster in the way this was fed in. Particularly during our last year in Vietnam, Nonie and I came to know Tuyen and his wife quite well because they were close friends of another Vietnamese couple who were extremely close friends of ours. This was Phillip and Pauline Tho, T-H-O. Pauline was a member of the National Assembly. Philip was a dentist, our personal dentist among other things, who eventually became much later a minister of health. They had both gone to—were among the rare Vietnamese who had gone to, I think it was college in the States. They had become very close friends of Senator Dodd of Connecticut, the father of the present Senator Dodd. They remained close friends of his, I think until Dodd—certainly until Dodd left the Senate. We were very close to Philip and Pauline. They're the ones who socially began to introduce us to their very close friends, Tuyen and his wife. As I say, we got to know them fairly well. When we left Vietnam in '62, Tuyen gave us, as a farewell present, a very fancy but weird lacquer portrait. I never quite figured out what it was of and because it was a gift

which I thought questionable that I should accept, I hung it in my office as Director of Vietnam Working Group in Washington. I've often wondered what happened to it over the years. I left it hanging in that office.

LC: You left it there when you moved on.

JM: Yes. I left it there. But I never could quite figure out why he and his wife really began to cultivate us so much since they were very close to CIA. There was not very much we could do for them. Anyways, there are strange things like that that happen in a diplomatic career.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: Sometimes you can't figure out motives. These were some of the important figures under Nhu in the Can Lao party.

LC: Is it fair in an American sense to describe it as a party?

JM: No, certainly not in the sense in which we think of as party. It's really more of a secret clandestine organization with extremely tightly-controlled membership operating often in mysterious ways. It's not really like an American political party at all. I would say it's closer to a communist party in its both its organization and its method of operation than anything in our American experience.

LC: You mentioned that the ambassador was concerned about this organization.

JM: Oh, he was early on about this approach.

LC: Was that because he wanted to have more sort of a democratic profile for the South Vietnamese government or was there more to it?

JM: Only in part, Laura. As I think I've said, Durbrow was anything except a liberal in terms of democratic approach, but he felt that this kind of approach was actually counterproductive, even in the Vietnamese context. So I think it was more of that that he was interested in democracy per se. Although Durbrow did recognize that if he was opposed to this approach, the other side is a democratic approach. So in that sense he certainly wasn't opposed to a democratic approach.

LC: Yes. Yes. Okay. Joe, let me ask you a little bit about going back to 1960, the end of the year and the imminent change to the Kennedy administration. In general terms, how much does a new, incoming administration mean in terms of the difference of policy to Foreign Service officers who are trying to protect American interests?

JM: I would say first, Laura, that often no change whatsoever. One does not necessarily anticipate change in the field. I think there is much greater change if Foreign Service officers are assigned to the State Department. One feels the change in administration much more than one does in the field. I say that because I came to recognize it when I came back to Washington in the summer of '62. There is much more of a personnel personality change because of the shift in administration. Having said that, as the events unfolded there were certainly quite a number of changes in policy approaches to Vietnam as the Kennedy administration wore on.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: One of the first, I would say, on the question of arming the Civil Guard, I discussed this earlier. That the Civil Guard, as a paramilitary institution, actually fell between our aid administration with its police programs, and the Defense Department with its emphasis on strictly military forces and organization. But it was Kennedy—I don't remember the precise day but I think it was fairly early on in his administration—directed the Defense Department to take on the armament and training of the Civil Guard, as well the regular military forces. That's an important example of policy change.

LC: But as you say, not the kind of thing that you on the ground in Saigon can anticipate.

JM: No. You can't necessarily anticipate it, no.

LC: Joe, to conclude our session today, I wonder if you can give an overview of where, at this critical point with President Kennedy assuming office, where Vietnam and the issues that confronted you in Saigon fit into the broader Cold War atmosphere that he was taking on as the new president. Can you sort of put it in some kind of order?

JM: Yeah. Well, I'll put it this way, Laura. I think that the progressive deterioration of both the guerilla situation in Vietnam in 1960—I have referred to the fact that guerilla activities began to extend to central Vietnam by September of 1960—and the equally serious deterioration of the political support within South Vietnam by non-communists of the Diem government, I think both of these worsening situations became major problems of the Kennedy administration almost immediately after he took over. Because it was within either days or weeks of the inauguration that Kennedy approved the counter-insurgency plan so that we could approach the Vietnamese government on it.

I mentioned that, I think, the last time when we got the telegram saying, "Approved at the highest level." Now, to me that was an indication that that administration was beginning to focus on the problem of Vietnam because of realization that it was a seriously deteriorating situation. I think Eisenhower had recognized this also, which is the reason the last thing he said to Kennedy was that Laos was the strategic key to Vietnam.

LC: Of course, there's the famous, much-reported complaint by Kennedy that President Eisenhower hadn't drawn his attention to the internal situation in South Vietnam.

JM: I don't—

LC: Do you not—

JM: In view of what Eisenhower is reported to have said to Kennedy by authoritative sources, I don't see how that conclusion could have been drawn.

LC: That may be a Ted Sorensen, Arthur Schlesinger contribution.

JM: Oh, it certainly could well be, who as sources are not always to be accepted by any means.

LC: Right. Okay. Well, thank you, Joe. Let's take a break there.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [16] of [57]
Date: March 18, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing our oral history interview for the Oral History Project here with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. This is the eighteenth of March, 2005. I am here on the campus of Texas Tech speaking to the ambassador by telephone from Nevada. Good morning again, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: You had a point that you wanted to add.

JM: The point I would like to add with respect to the counter-insurgency plan was that after my long presentation in March at the ambassador's direction to Thuan, the number three in the Vietnamese government, about the counter-insurgency plan and subsequent discussions, including those by the ambassador over the next couple of months, we never really seemed to be getting anywhere as far as the Vietnamese were concerned. But finally after Ambassador Durbrow made his definitive departure two or three days thereafter when I was the *chargé d'affaires* at the embassy—that you know was the man in charge when an ambassador is gone. I had got a call from Thuan saying that Diem had instructed him to tell us that he was accepting the two principal points that we had finally—what should I say—declined in to because of the stonewalling by the Diem government of establishing a central intelligence agency and ensuring a strong, single, central command in order to respond quickly to guerilla activities. The fact that Diem waited until Durbrow had departed indicates how far relations between him and Durbrow had declined, unfortunately. I don't put any blame on Durbrow because he was pushing the Diem government on things that I think were completely justified, including relations with Cambodia so as not drive Cambodia further into the communist camp than it seemed to be going. So I then reported this by telegram to Washington but it turned out that that telegram was garbled and didn't get un-garbled until, I guess, a week or ten days later until after a major event occurred, which was the visit by Vice President Lyndon Johnson to Vietnam. The fact that the South Vietnamese government had finally acceded to the two main points into which our pressure had eventually devolved were not taken

into consideration in Washington in connection with the vice president's visit. Now, as history turned out it didn't really matter. Though we were told that Diem had accepted these two points, he never really put them into practice. He did set up a central intelligence organization, but he maintained other intelligence organizations as well. It proved to be something that didn't amount to a great deal at all, and the same way as far as unity of command was concerned. He never really accepted that, primarily because I think he was afraid that if he did he would place himself in greater danger from being overthrown by the armed forces. On the other hand, by not doing that he could not fight the war effectively against the communist guerillas and because he couldn't, the dissension within the armed forces grew because of the way the war was going. Diem was in a great dilemma. He was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. But my own conclusion is that he would have been better off instituting unity of command to try to deal with the communists effectively. Otherwise he was bound to have growing dissension within the armed forces and was eventually overthrown by them. That's a historical judgment based on what happened afterwards. I think he made a major error of judgment there, looking at it historically.

LC: Well, the points in that vignette are extremely intriguing and with your permission I'll pursue a couple of those points.

JM: Yes.

LC: First, as to the counter-insurgency plan itself, there's some suggestion in the *Foreign Relations in the United States*—in fact it's a memo drafted by General Lansdale—saying that the outline of the plan was in fact first devised in the Department of Defense and then sent to Saigon. The country team, of which you were the head or certainly the chair of this committee—

JM: The subcommittee.

LC: Yes. Sort of massaged it a little bit. Do you have a reaction to that? Is there anything you would like to—

JM: Well, all I can say, Laura, is that if that's the case I was totally unaware of it. The major share of the drafting of the counter-insurgency plan, as I think I've told you before, was done by Maj. Kurtz Miller of MAAG. Now whether through back channel, what he did was essentially sent out by Washington through that channel and then

presented on behalf of the MAAG as their document, I don't know because back channels did exist between the head of MAAG and the Department of Defense.

LC: Sure.

JM: I had never heard this point before. I hadn't even noticed it going through the *Foreign Relations*, although I haven't read everything in that by any means.

LC: Well, some of it really doesn't bear close reading but I just wondered if you had any whiff of that.

JM: I certainly was not aware of it if it was the case. I got the impression that Kurtz Miller was doing much of this drafting himself. Maybe I could have been wrong. I don't know.

LC: Fair enough. Now, the deterioration in the relationship between President Diem and Ambassador Durbrow is something that we've talked about at some length. I know that after the presentation that you made to Thuan in March 1961, the ambassador did continue to have at least a few more meetings all the way into April, I gather, with President Diem.

JM: As I recall he did. I can't recall specifically, Laura, but I'm sure he did.

LC: Sure. Sure. Certainly he knew that he was soon to leave Saigon. Do you have any idea when he knew that that would be the case definitively?

JM: No, Laura. I don't think I could give you an accurate answer on that. I don't recall when he may have gotten the word. I may not have known because he may have gotten some hint even before we knew in the embassy about it in an official way.

LC: It wouldn't have been any surprise to him, though, because as I think you mentioned earlier he had been in post for quite a while.

JM: That's right.

LC: Do you know where he went?

JM: Yes. In effect, he and Nolting exchanged jobs. Durbrow became the number two in the American diplomatic mission to NATO in Paris. The head of it was Finletter, who subsequently became, I believe, secretary of the Air Force. Maybe he had been that before under Eisenhower. Probably. He had probably been that before under Eisenhower.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: Finletter was then the ambassador in charge of that mission and Durbrow became his number two. I think Nolting had held that job before.

LC: That's an interesting choice. Was that his final career station? Do you know?

JM: I think he had one—he stayed in that job, I think, something like three or four years. He was there quite a time. Then I think his final assignment was as the deputy commandant of the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama. There was always a Foreign Service representative in each of the major war colleges of the armed services. There was always one Foreign Service officer as a deputy commandant both at the National War College and at the Army War College, Naval War College, and the Air War College.

LC: Okay. Did he share with you or are you aware of any kind of reflective assessments that he did of his time in Saigon, sort of standing back from the day-to-day and the push-and-shove with both probably Washington and with President Diem? Did he—

JM: Well, I got the impression in years later contacts with Durbrow that despite the fact that Diem had in many ways broken substantive relations with him, although not complete personal contact, that Durbrow still had very high regard for Diem and I think may have felt that it was unfortunate that he was overthrown in the coup in 1963. Durbrow didn't seem to me in subsequent contacts to harbor ill personal feelings against Diem or to have finally come to a judgment that Diem should have disappeared as the head of the government.

LC: It's interesting because it seems to suggest that there was a framework of respect, perhaps, between the two of them, although disagreements obviously on implementation.

JM: Well, I've told you Durbrow was an extreme conservative in his personal political views. He had certainly been throughout most of his tenure as ambassador in Vietnam very much a pro-Diem man from the time he arrived there in 1957 until he left in 1961. Although at that time I think his position was somewhat more ambivalent because of the problems that we were having with Diem. I will add, Laura, that I suspect that a turning point and perhaps the principal turning point in Diem's view of Durbrow

came from the contact during the coup attempt in November of 1960 when Diem telephoned Durbrow wanting a public statement by him in support of Diem and Durbrow hedged.

LC: It just wasn't recoverable, it seems, after that.

JM: See, Durbrow was continuing to press from time to time for political reforms. On specific problems in relations to Cambodia and South Vietnam and other issues as well. Diem became increasingly resentful of Durbrow and the pressure he was trying to bring on him.

LC: I gather again from *FRUS* that one of the suggestions that Ambassador Durbrow continued to put before Diem, even in to the final days of his tour into April of 1961, was the idea that it would behoove the South Vietnamese government to include in the cabinet non-communist opposition members.

JM: Laura, I'm not sure I can remember specifically how long that kind of urging on the part of Durbrow continued. I know a renewed attempt was made after the coup attempt to get Diem to do this. As I recall, probably in December, but I'm not sure of the date of that. I am not sure that Durbrow continued—he may have continued to push on some of these things, but he did not continue to push on sending Nhu out of the country because Diem had made it so clear he could not consider that. He may have continued on some of the other political reform pressures that we were trying to bring on Diem.

LC: Well, let me ask you now about the interval that you were acting as the *chargé d'affaires*. Was that just a few days? Was it a week?

JM: Yes, it was just a few days. Normally, I would not have been the *chargé d'affaires* because I was the head of the political section of the embassy. Normally there's a deputy chief of mission between my position and the ambassador's. But the deputy chief of mission at that point was on home leave in the United States. Also, I think it might have been normal for Arthur Gardner who actually outranked me. He was not a Foreign Service officer. He was a Foreign Service Reserve officer. He was not only the director of USOM, which would not normally have put him in the line to become *chargé d'affaires*, but he was also economic counselor of the embassy. Since he outranked me in terms of rank, normally I think even though he was a reserve officer he would have become the *chargé*. But Arthur, whose office was not in the main embassy

building but across town a bit said, "No. Why don't you go ahead and become the *chargé*," which I felt was very generous of him. So I became the *chargé* for roughly a week, Laura.

LC: I think it was something like that, maybe even less.

JM: It didn't last very long. A couple of days after I became *chargé* I got this ostensible concession by Diem to our pressure to the two points which we were continuing to push with respect to the counter-insurgency plan. I believe it was probably about the same day that we received a visitor from Sen. Thomas Dodd of Connecticut. I don't know whether you know anything about Senator Dodd or not. You know of his son, Chris Dodd. Shall I tell you a little bit about Senator Dodd?

LC: Yes, please. This would be very interesting.

JM: Sen. Thomas Dodd, I think was part of the prosecution at the war crimes trials at Nuremberg in 1946. He was elected as Democratic senator from Connecticut—let me see now—probably in either '58 or '60, succeeding, I think, the father of George Bush, Prescott Bush, who was a Republican. Tom Dodd was as strong an anti-communist as the United States has ever produced, I believe, and very strongly supportive of our policy in Vietnam and remained so until he was defeated. He was defeated in 1970. That's when he had two terms. As far as I know, his first visit to Vietnam was in early May of 1961. I'll tell you a little bit of an incident which sort of—it has always related in my memory as a favorable episode as far as Dodd's personality was concerned. He arrived in the late afternoon or early evening at the airport in Saigon. I, as *chargé*, went out to meet him. He came over from Bangkok in a small plane. As it turned out—what is this thing that you use to get off the airplane?

LC: The jet way type thing?

JM: Yeah. Anyway, the one we wheeled out was too high. We didn't wheel it out, but the Vietnamese did. It was too high. It took, I think, fifteen or twenty minutes to get another one. From earlier experience with visiting members of Congress I had known how touchy they were about anything of this sort. I expected Dodd to be furious. He remained very patient and calm about the whole thing. We finally got him off the airplane. Either that evening or the next evening the Vietnamese government had a dinner at the Caravelle Hotel, the main hotel in Saigon, in Senator Dodd's honor. I was

at that dinner when I was suddenly summoned to the telephone by the communications unit in the embassy that they had just received the highest priority message from Washington saying that the vice president was proposing to visit Vietnam the following, I think it was about four or five days hence, as part of a six-nation tour on behalf of President Kennedy. So I immediately telephoned Thuan from the Caravelle Hotel to get the assent of the Vietnamese government to this visit. Thuan's answer at that point was that, "Diem would have gone to bed by now and I can't take this up with him until tomorrow morning." Well, knowing again cases where if you don't react immediately to a high priority message from top-level or next-to-top-level in the U.S. government, careers can be ruined. I worried I think all night until I got the call from Thuan in the middle of the morning the next day saying, "Yes. Diem agrees to the visit," and I fired off the response. Of course, we had many messages over the next several days, including that Johnson's favorite drink was Cutty Sark scotch. We should be sure to have that on hand. Among other things it was said absolutely no teas for Lady Bird Johnson who was accompanying him. Johnson also wanted to stay in a hotel. Well, Diem was insistent that Johnson stay in what had been, I guess, one of the principal government buildings during the French control, which was used as a guesthouse by the South Vietnamese government. Diem was insisting that Johnson stay there. So we had many back and forth on that until finally Johnson very reluctantly acceded to Diem's adamant insistence that Johnson had to stay in that palace. You can see the kind of things you go through. The poor Foreign Service officer on the spot is under great pressure because he knows if he makes a misstep that may be the end of his stay.

LC: It's a minefield. It's a minefield.

JM: Anyway, we finally got his schedule worked out, including all these household details. Then, I think, it was I believe a few hours before Johnson and Lady Bird were due to arrive. They made their first stop in Taiwan and they were coming on to Vietnam. A few hours before, "Oh, Lady Bird wants a tea party so she can meet the principle people in Saigon." So my wife had to get—I think she called together all the wives of the officers in our political section to get out invitations that afternoon, because Johnson was only going to be in town for about thirty-six hours, tea for the next day, rounded up all the chauffeurs to hand-deliver these to various Vietnamese, other

diplomatic missions and Americans to this tea. My wife still remembers that great scramble to get these invitations out. While we're on this tea party, Madame Nhu of course was the representative of the Vietnamese government there. By that point the new ambassador, Nolting, and his wife arrived. So Mrs. Nolting was there also. Nolting said on arrival, "Well, since I don't know anything about Vietnam I'm going to let you continue to handle most of these things with respect to the visit because you know what's going on." The tea had to be—actually I think the message about, since Nolting had arrived two days before Johnson, that message about the tea for Lady Bird had arrived after Nolting had come. So Mrs. Nolting said, "Give the tea at your house, not at the residence, since you know what you're doing and we're not even set up to offer a tea at the residence at this point."

LC: Right. Right.

JM: At that tea Madame Nhu made a speech. Mrs. Nolting made a speech. Then, let me see, then seven-year-old daughter Anne was standing, watching all these things and she piped up before all these ladies, "Mommy, aren't you going to make a speech, too?" That broke what had been a pretty icy tea up to that point. It sort of brought the house down and things were very relaxed thereafter. So that's a little footnote to history, too.

LC: Wonderful. It's wonderful. The Noltings, as you say, showed up a couple of days before.

JM: Yeah. It was just two days before. Johnson, I think, arrived on a Monday evening and left on Wednesday morning. I was *chargé*, I think, from about Monday to Saturday. I think Nolting had arrived either Friday or Saturday. I can't remember, but just two days before Johnson was due to come in.

LC: Now did he, during that two-day period or if you remember, did he present his credentials and get all of that taken care of?

JM: Yes, he had officially become ambassador. I think the Vietnamese government accelerated the presentation of credentials so he could be ambassador when Johnson arrived.

LC: Okay. So that was quite helpful

JM: Yes. Well, helpful in a formal sense, but as I say, Nolting I think rather

wisely said, “I’m brand new to this situation so you go ahead and handle things.”

LC: So meanwhile Joe and Nonie are trying to manage everything to do with the visit, is what I’m gathering.

JM: Do you want to hear anything about that visit?

LC: Yes, please. Absolutely.

JM: Well, obviously all of the principal people were out at the airport, including Diem, when Johnson arrived. Johnson and Diem rode in a car together in a convoy from the airport into Saigon. Now, the Vietnamese were lined up all along the street all the way from the airport into Saigon. Johnson insisted upon stopping the convoy every, oh, I don’t know, let’s say a couple hundred yards and getting out of the car and shaking hands with the Vietnamese along the street corners. The Vietnamese thought this was great. They had never seen anything like this from a politician. Diem, who was quite reserved and withdrawn and not really a politician at all in the American sense, looked slightly embarrassed by the whole procedure. But Johnson ensured not only that the Vietnamese would be aware of this kind of political gesture, but that all the American correspondents were seeing him getting out of the car and shaking hands with the Vietnamese. So it would be sure to be on American television and in the American press. So that trip from the airport into Saigon took quite some time, as you can see. The rest of that evening was quite informal. The American community had been notified that Johnson was prepared to meet with them in one of the American buildings. I think we had a big buffet supper there. I think Nonie sat next to Johnson at this big buffet supper. He was bouncing all around talking to the American community. I don’t know whether he ate very much or not, but this was a big informal affair with the Americans in Saigon. The official program for the Vietnamese took place the next day. Actually, the first thing that happened the next day was a meeting in the embassy of the principal American officials in Saigon with Johnson and the entourage he had brought with him. I remember that because—you probably have heard of Ken Young, haven’t you?

LC: Sure, the State Department.

JM: Ken had been director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. He was a non-career officer. He had resigned and become the representative of one of the big oil companies, but when Kennedy came in, Kennedy chose him as ambassador to Thailand

because of Ken's familiarity with Southeast Asian affairs. Well, Ken was on his way out to join his post as ambassador in Thailand as part of the Johnson entourage. At some point during this meeting in the ambassador's office, Johnson and his group and the American officials in Saigon, Ken was busily talking to somebody in an aside. Johnson suddenly stopped and said, "Ken, pay attention to what's going on!" You get these little vignettes that stick in one's mind. So I guess we were in general giving Johnson and his entourage, trying to give them an up-to-date briefing of the situation in Vietnam. Anyway, later that morning Johnson had his one formal meeting with Diem in the presidential palace. I was the translator. I won't say interpreter because I didn't attempt at all a verbatim interpreting. I'm not qualified for that. What I would do was just summarize the presentations, the statements each had made from one to the other since Johnson was speaking English and Diem in French. Johnson had in his hand a long letter, several pages from President Kennedy to President Diem outlining various things that we wanted the Vietnamese government to do in order to try to improve the conduct of the war with the communists. Johnson had gone through this letter carefully and put a number beside many of the points made in it. What he attempted to do was to get Diem to focus on these points one by one as he went down. Well, Diem in his usual fashion with Americans pressing him on things he was not interested in doing, would listen to what Johnson said for a moment and then go off on a tangent of some sort. Then Johnson would try to bring him back to the next point in the letter. Well, this went on for quite some time and it was very obvious that the two were talking completely past each other, even at this next-to-the-highest level of the U.S. government.

LC: Interesting. Wow.

JM: Johnson was not really getting anywhere on this so this session finally ended. Then in the afternoon Johnson attended an exhibition by the South Vietnamese armed forces. I remember being seated in something like a grandstand where this exhibition was taking place. The South Vietnamese general who was in charge of Johnson's security—I may have told you this before—turned to me at one point during this session and said, "Your vice president has altered this itinerary so often that I haven't the slightest idea where he's going to be so how can I provide security for him?" He said, "My only real hope is that the communists are just as confused as I am as where

he's going to be because that's the only thing that's going to give him effective security." So this passed off. Then that evening Diem gave his formal dinner at the presidential palace with Johnson as guest of honor. There was one long table, I would assume somewhere between thirty, forty, or fifty people at the table. Interestingly, in the middle of the table on the opposite sides were two huge armchairs. All of the other chairs were very simple. Those were the chairs for Diem and Johnson to be seated opposite each other. It was at that dinner that Johnson praised Diem as of the same caliber as Winston Churchill. You probably remember that comparison.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: Before they went in to dinner—this is another little vignette that's interesting—Johnson decided that he wanted to use the same technique on Diem that he had used as majority leader in the Senate and I suppose as vice-president, too, of one-on-one conversation with Diem with only an interpreter. That one I didn't do the interpreting, thank God. I was exhausted by that point. It was done by an officer from the CIA station. As Diem and Johnson were off in a corner, Nolting, our new ambassador approached to see whether he could be of assistance only to draw Johnson's wrath and to tell him in effect to go away. Obviously, he wanted this conversation to be a usual politician *tête à tête* with Diem since he knew he hadn't gotten very far in the morning in the formal session. In this informal meeting he hoped to get farther but obviously I don't think he did. I don't know just what was said. The CIA interpreter did draw up a telegram. I don't remember what it said, but I don't think it got very far. That, in effect, was the visit in a nutshell.

LC: Joe, let me ask you about the entourage. You mentioned that Ken Young was there and also Lady Bird Johnson, obviously attending some separate events but probably—

JM: Oh, wait a minute. This reminds me of something else, Laura, that I must mention about Lady Bird.

LC: Okay.

JM: I guess it must have been the second night of the visit. I was in the bedroom with Lyndon and Lady Bird at the guesthouse. Johnson was on the telephone to Washington constantly until about 3:00AM. Lady Bird was in bed sleeping while all this

commotion was going on. Johnson slept one hour that night. Here was a man who had had a heart attack as majority leader in the Senate. This was his second country on a six-country visit. He had one hour of sleep that night. Now, how any human being could do that, I don't know. To me, it shows a remarkable side of politicians. I know when Johnson left the next day I have never been so weary in my life as I was.

LC: Because presumably you stayed up a goodly part of that night, too.

JM: Yeah. All the tension on which I felt trying to make sure the visit went properly.

LC: Absolutely, the pressure.

JM: But how that man could have done it and he had four more countries to go, I don't know, a man who had had a heart attack.

LC: It's remarkable.

JM: Isn't it? It's absolutely fantastic.

LC: Who was he on the phone with, the White House people or national security?

JM: Yes. He was trying to get messages through to President Kennedy. I don't think he spoke to Kennedy personally, but somebody at a high level. Maybe McGeorge Bundy, I don't know who, who was the national security advisor. But that was his main purpose. He may have talked to some other people in Washington, too.

LC: Your purpose in being there was just to make sure—

JM: You know, I don't specifically remember. There must have been a purpose. I can't remember. It must have been to make sure that he got what he wanted.

LC: What he wanted, yes. I would think so. I would think so. Was this the first time you had ever come across him, Joe?

JM: Yes. This was the—

LC: That's quite an introduction.

JM: Yeah. The only other time I ever met Johnson, I think, was after Kennedy's assassination when Johnson held a—after the Kennedy funeral, Johnson held a big reception on the eighth floor of the State Department for all the visiting heads of state, heads of government and so forth that had come to attend the Kennedy funeral. Since I was the escort for the South Vietnamese delegate we went through the receiving line and saw [Johnson] and Lady Bird again. Oh, I will add one other thing, Laura, which I may

forget later.

LC: Okay.

JM: Whereas I, as a result of personal contacts and for other reasons do not have a high regard at all for Johnson, Lady Bird is a lady to the core. You've probably have heard this from others. When we got back to Washington after completion of our tour in Saigon, which was over a year later, Lady Bird Johnson had, I guess it was Liz Carpenter who was her secretary, telephone Nonie and invite Nonie to come to the vice president's residence for tea. This is also memorable because Nonie said she was getting this in effect command invitation. She had to say, "Well, I'll have to see whether I can get a babysitter for the kids." She immediately telephoned me in the office because I think this—I don't know whether the invitation had come that day or what. I think so probably. Nonie telephoned me in the office, "What shall I do?" I said, "Well, I'll come home and babysit while you go to tea at the residence of the vice president." So she went there and I think she was *tête à tête* with Lady Bird Johnson for a while during the tea, which I thought was an extraordinary gesture on the part of a lady who was obviously extremely busy, even to remember the fact that Nonie had given a tea in her honor in Saigon.

LC: That's really quite incredible.

JM: Isn't that interesting?

LC: Yes. It is.

JM: What a contrast with the husband. How she stood the guy, I don't know.

LC: I don't think it could be any more white-and-black than the two of them, just from what I—

JM: Exactly. Now, you asked about the entourage. Let's see whether I can recall who all were there. One was the sister of President Kennedy, who was the wife of Steven Smith.

LC: Jean.

JM: She was part of the entourage. Johnson, when they were together publicly in any way, would always introduce her as, "President Kennedy's baby sister," and he obviously played up to her. She didn't have anything of any substance to contribute to the visit whatsoever, but she was along.

LC: What about Steve Smith? Did you have any impression of him?

JM: Of whom?

LC: Of her husband, Steve Smith.

JM: I don't think he was along.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: No. I think it was just she.

LC: Just her. Okay.

JM: Then one of the people who was along, I can't remember his name. He was a chief assistant to Kennedy who later ran afoul because he was found in a men's room in, I think, the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) with another man. I don't know whether you ever read about that incident. Of course, that was a major scandal. Johnson separated himself from him. But he had been working with Johnson, I think, for something like fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five years.

LC: Yeah. I can't remember his name.

JM: But he obviously was a very important member of the entourage and from my contacts with him, a very nice guy. He was quite pleasant but he obviously was probably the closest person to Johnson on the trip.

LC: So it was a pretty small group then.

JM: Yeah. Now, I do believe—no. I was gonna guess. I can't remember who the others were on the trip now, Laura, other than these. Liz Carpenter was along and she was not a very pleasant individual, Lady Bird's secretary. Nonie doesn't remember her with any pleasure at all.

LC: Did she have some rough edges?

JM: Yeah. She was quite conscious of her position and often rather short-tempered.

LC: I see. I see. The details of the trip are absolutely fascinating. Did it make a difference to Diem that the vice president, the new vice president—

JM: Oh, yes. He very much appreciated that. Of course, Nolting had arrived with instructions from Kennedy to get along with Diem. Now, I don't know whether Diem was aware of that at this stage. He certainly became aware of it shortly thereafter, but Diem very much appreciated the fact that the vice president had come and certainly

went out of his way to receive him properly, except in a substantive sense.

LC: When Vice President Johnson was sort of working on Diem over in the corner, were you and the rest of the room sort of observing this?

JM: I was in the room, but I didn't attempt to approach them.

LC: Sure. Oh, my goodness.

JM: They had an interpreter. In view of what happened to Ambassador Nolting I'm delighted I didn't make any attempt.

LC: That's right. Can you describe though, Joe, President Diem's demeanor? I mean, I think we can probably visualize Vice President Johnson, but what about President Diem? I mean, he's a tiny, tiny fellow. He's got this huge Texan kind of working on him. Can you describe his demeanor?

JM: Well, actually as I indicated in a substantive way he didn't treat Johnson in anyway different from the manner in which he had treated other Americans both previously and substantively who were trying to get Diem to do things. This was his favorite technique, to go off on tangents.

LC: Do you remember any of the things that he decided he would talk about rather than the numbers one, two and three that—

JM: Well, I can't remember specifically in this case. I do remember later—I've forgotten whether it's when I accompanied either Senator Symington or Averell Harriman to call on Diem because the ambassador was tied up with something else. At one or maybe both these sessions, I don't think Symington had anything specifically that he was pushing Diem on, but Harriman was pushing him to support our position on the Geneva Conference on Laos. Then Diem would start talking about specific terrorist incidents in Vietnam, guerilla incidents, and get out very detailed maps of rural areas of Vietnam and start showing Harriman how Diem's forces had reacted to this in a very effective manner and going into extreme detail. This was one of his great techniques in dealing with American officials trying to press him.

LC: So he was very good and bringing up the small, sort of very narrow issues in response to some broader assault that he didn't want to engage with. Joe, let's take a break there today.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [17] of [57]
Date: March 25, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the twenty-fifth of March 2005. I am here on the campus of Texas Tech and I'm speaking to the ambassador by telephone. Again, you're in Nevada. Good morning, sir.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, where did you want to sort of pick up today's discussion?

JM: I think the logical point, having dealt last time with Vice President Lyndon Johnson's visit, is to deal with the change of ambassadors, which occurred just prior to the Johnson visit. Amb. Elbridge Durbrow, who had been in Vietnam since 1957, left in I think it was either late April or probably early May in 1961. A few days later his replacement, Frederick Nolting, popularly known as Fritz, came as his successor. Nolting came from an assignment in Paris. I believe he was the number two in the U.S. mission to NATO. He and Durbrow, in effect, exchanged jobs. Nolting came with orders from President Kennedy to get along with President Diem. Kennedy had decided that that was going to be his policy at that stage. Nolting arrived with these instructions and soon came to accept and believe them, not just a hundred percent but a thousand percent. He, I think for the rest of his life, remained of this persuasion even though Kennedy subsequently changed his policy, as is well known. But Nolting never did abandon his conviction that Diem represented the best chance for our policy in Vietnam to be successful. Not too long after Nolting's arrival, he changed deputy chiefs of mission. It had been Francis Cunningham for, oh, I think a period of I would say maybe a year-and-a-half or close to two years probably. Nolting brought in a close friend of his, another Foreign Service officer, William Trueheart. The two had long been personal friends and Nolting wanted somebody whom he regarded highly, both personally and professionally, as his number two. Interestingly enough, when the great crisis with respect to the Diem regime started to arise in 1963 with the Buddhist problem and Nolting was away on home leave, Trueheart began himself in his official messages to Washington to increasingly doubt the desirability of our continued support of the Diem

regime. Nolting subsequently returned the to—had parted policy-wise and a long-term friendship came to an end as a result of the policy differences. I don't know whether they ever reconciled or not, but I will say that on the very contentious issue of U.S. policy with respect to Vietnam, a lot of old friendships did come to an end. This happened in my case, too, in at least a couple of instances. So what happened between Nolting and Trueheart was by no means the exception in this respect. Now, with Nolting's arrival and then his choice of a person he trusted very much as his number two, my importance in the scheme of things in the U.S. setup in Vietnam began to decline fairly obviously. Shortly after Trueheart's arrival Nolting decided that Trueheart should be the chairman of the local interagency committee dealing with counter-insurgency. I had been, in effect, since I had been the chairman of the subcommittee of the country team which drew up the counter-insurgency plan. Actually, I couldn't argue with Nolting's decision because it was really more logical to have the number two in the embassy rather than the head of the political section as the head of this committee. That change alone reduced my influence, but one of the greatest differences, probably the greatest reason for the decline in the role that I had been playing, a steadily-increasing role from the time of my arrival in August of '59 until change of ambassadors in May of '61, it was not surprising that the principle reason for my declining importance in the scheme of things was that Nolting knew that I did not agree with our policy of continuing support of Diem. Since Nolting became convinced, as I have indicated, that this was the correct policy it was not surprising that he looked less and less to me for support and influence. Interesting, Laura, it was very noticeable in both official and personal relations how my importance had declined.

LC: Okay.

JM: I think I've indicated to you before that Thuan, in effect the chief of staff for President Diem as well as the minister of defense, who had been constantly seeking me out for many weeks and months prior to the change in ambassadors, had indicated he was well aware that I was close to Durbrow. As soon as this change occurred Thuan's interest in me very noticeably declined.

LC: Really?

JM: Oh, yes, which is not surprising. That's the way, shall I call it power and influence, work. When it declines one's interlocutors on the other side soon become

aware of it. My wife Nonie also noticed it with respect to Wolf Ladejinsky. I don't know if—have you ever heard of Ladejinsky?

LC: Yes. We talked about him just briefly.

JM: I thought we probably had. Well, Ladejinsky who was an advisor to Diem, not on the U.S. payroll but paid by the Vietnamese government, who had been extremely influential in the land reform in Taiwan earlier. During the time that I was playing an important role, Wolf often came to the house just to talk. It was very noticeable after my influence began to decline that these visits declined and soon disappeared. So there were several indications, not to my surprise, that my contacts and influence had substantially diminished.

LC: Joe, can I ask you a couple of questions about that?

JM: Sure.

LC: First of all, with regard to Mr. Ladejinsky, when he would come over to just kind of perhaps just visit with you, did you have a sense that you were in some way transmitting information on to Diem and his advisors because, of course, Ladejinsky was very personally close with the president?

JM: One always had to be aware, Laura, in talking with individuals. I do want to add—you may want to go back to it—but I want to add one thing with respect to the policy differences between Nolting and me.

LC: Sure. Yes.

JM: Though I disagreed strongly with our policy, I never attempted to undermine it in any way because I think that is unforgivable in a public official. In your contacts with both the government, to which the mission is accredited, and in contacts with the press, I think a government official either supports the present policy of the government or he resigns and gets out. So in all my contacts with the press I always followed the official line. I never tried in any respect while I was in Vietnam to undermine Nolting or the policy of our government in that respect. I feel very strongly on that score.

LC: As you say, that is what is expected of you as a professional Foreign Service officer.

JM: Yes, but of course a lot of people in the government don't do that as one can see by all the leaks in the press.

LC: That's certainly true. Joe, at what point did you learn, did you diagnose what Ambassador Nolting's position would be and the gulf between you? How did that first emerge?

JM: Well, by the fact that I was not consulted as much and that I became very quickly well aware that Nolting held increasingly strong views about support of Diem. Actually, my personal relations, as well as my official relations with Nolting, he was a real Southern gentleman. I never felt in any way that this affected our personal relationship at all. When I get to the end of my tour in Vietnam I want to bring up something which will show how fair Nolting actually was. I could never fault him in any respect on this score. While we're talking about this I might mention one other thing that occurred, oh, I'm not sure when, but several months after Nolting's arrival. Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, who had become increasingly active publicly with respect in government functions, decided that a monument should be erected in Saigon to the Trung sisters. The Trung sisters were Vietnamese ladies back, I think, in the first century AD who had been influential—excuse me, Laura—in resisting Chinese penetration of Vietnam. I guess they were probably the most active Vietnamese women politically until Madame Nhu came along. I felt strongly that with the war worsening with increasing casualties among South Vietnamese troops that it was a real waste of available funds to be erecting this statue rather than doing something for the troops. Mrs. Nolting, the wife of the ambassador, decided to call a meeting of all of the agency and section chiefs in the American mission in Vietnam to ask for contributions to the fund that Madame Nhu was trying to get up to build this statue. At this meeting she went around to each person and asked her to canvas all of the officers and their wives in each agency and section for contributions. When she came to Emily Gardiner, the wife of the director of the AID mission as well as the economic counselor, she said, "I won't contribute myself, but I will ask for as you request for contributions from others." When she came to Nonie, my wife, Nonie said, "I won't contribute myself and I won't ask any of the officers to contribute." When I got home from work that evening Nonie met me ashen faced at the door and she said, "I've just brought your career to an end." She described what had happened. I responded and I said, "You did absolutely the right thing. I have no difficulty with that whatsoever and we'll take the consequences and see what happens." Well, the personal

relations between Mrs. Nolting and Nonie and to a degree with me were always somewhat cooler thereafter. It may have been a little hard to put the finger on it, but we became quite aware—as it did not influence the personal relationship between Ambassador Nolting and either Nonie or myself. So there you have it.

LC: But that's a very interesting sidelight on what else was going on that's not in the Pentagon Papers but still a very interesting item. Do you know whether Mrs. Nolting—what was Mrs. Nolting's name, by the way? Do you remember?

JM: Lindsay was her first name.

LC: Lindsay?

JM: Yes.

LC: Okay. Had she a separate, perhaps closer, more intimate relationship with Madame Nhu?

JM: I don't think it was particularly close. I don't think Madame Nhu ever got close to anybody especially. Mrs. Nolting was—she did not play an important role politically normally. I think she tried to marshal funds for Madame Nhu simply because she thought as wife of the American ambassador she should do this sort of thing. Lindsay Nolting was a Southern lady, very easygoing, as a lot of Southerners are, as you recognize, soft-spoken, not an activist in any sense of the term at all.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about the new ambassador's leadership style. You've hinted and drawn some interesting attention, I think drawn attention to interesting elements in policy differences, but how did he run the embassy?

JM: Well, he was clearly the leader of the embassy. He did not rule it with an iron hand. He was not an explosive personality at all, but everybody knew and acknowledged, knew that he was the chief and respected him. In his relations with heads of other agencies he never tried to act as a dictator. He always tried to get along well. His position was known. He tried, of course, to convince other agency heads that the policy he was pursuing was correct and in many respects was successful.

LC: What was the relationship that he developed with the MAAG commanders?

JM: Well, the commander of MAAG when he arrived was Lieutenant General McGarr who had succeeded Lt. Gen. Sam Williams who left just before Durbrow the ambassador left. General McGarr, for much of the time he was in Vietnam, was also a

hundred-percent supporter of Diem. Therefore his views and Nolting's on the principal policy issue at that time coincided completely. Interestingly enough, however, as time passed and McGarr became increasingly frustrated with trying to get the Diem regime to accept his views and recommendations in the military field, particularly with respect to military effectiveness against the communists, McGarr eventually became disillusioned with Diem himself and came to hold views much closer to the ones I held before he left. Actually before he was replaced. We'll get to that in a short time when the whole U.S military setup in Vietnam was revised by President Kennedy.

LC: I referred just a moment ago to the Pentagon Papers. There's a brief paragraph talking about the transition to Nolting there. The point that's made there was that Ambassador Nolting was essentially to coax President Diem toward reforms whereas Ambassador Durbrow had tried to pressure the president toward internal reforms. Does that sound just about right to you?

JM: Yes and no. There was some coaxing, I agree, but there wasn't too much pressure on that. I'll get to that point a little later, too, when we can see how Nolting handled that as well.

LC: Okay, good. Joe—

JM: What I'd like to—unless you have some further questions on this, Laura.

LC: The only other question I have concerns the time period of the changeover from the old ambassador to the new one coming in and that coinciding with Vice President Johnson's visit. The thing that I wanted to draw out there to see whether you had any comment on was whether there was any thinking around this time that the United States might draw SEATO for example, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, into the actions to support South Vietnam that were being contemplated at that time. Did that come across your desk at all?

JM: I don't recall any specific activity in that connection, Laura. We, of course, from time to time, particularly for the annual SEATO meetings, would invoke the clauses in the SEATO treaty with respect to Vietnam. I think also from time to time in public defense within the U.S, our official policy would invoke SEATO but I don't think this ever became a major issue because I think it was generally recognized that this was pretty much a cover operation in a sense rather than something that was going to become really

effective in pursuit and execution of our policy.

LC: Okay, very good. There was somewhere that you wanted to take us now.

JM: Yeah. What I'd like to proceed with now is the decision by the Kennedy administration to prepare a white paper on Vietnam in support of the policy changes which it was moving toward, policy changes not with respect to our support of Diem but with respect to the conduct of the war.

LC: Very good.

JM: In, I think it was August 1961, the White House sent out Bill Jorden, who was a very respected foreign correspondent of the *New York Times*. I think he had spent a lot of time in Japan as a correspondent. The White House sent him out, had chosen him to prepare this white paper and sent him out to Vietnam to collect information that could go into that paper to show that this developing conflict was begun by the communist regime in North Vietnam and not by the U.S. The political section with me as the head played an important role in connection with the Jorden visit. He was interested very much in getting information from the South Vietnamese liaison mission to the International Control Commission which had been established by the Geneva Accords of 1954. Because violations of those accords, when they were taken to the—I'm going to use the abbreviation ICC, the International Control Commission—emanated, of course, from the South—were brought to the attention of the ICC through the South Vietnamese liaison mission. So it had a lot of information and records with respect to this point. We in the political section were the principle American contacts with that liaison mission and therefore it was quite natural that Jordan worked with and through us in getting his information. We were very close. We were personally very close to Col. Huang Thuy Nam, the head of the South Vietnamese liaison mission. Colonel Nam collaborated one hundred percent with Jorden in furnishing information which he sought. I'd like to mention a couple of things with respect to Colonel Nam. Colonel Nam was an old Vietnamese gentleman in the traditional sense, very polite, in some ways European. He spoke perfect French. Very highly respected by everybody, not particularly influential in the government but he did run that [liaison] mission and ran it effectively. We had, as I've indicated, close official and personal relations with him. One night when we were invited to dinner at his residence, which was in the South Vietnamese liaison mission

compound for dinner, he put in front of us on the dinner table a plant which he had been fostering for many months which was designed to open as we sat through dinner. It was a lily plant. The flower was designed to open while we sat there during dinner. This was to honor Nonie my wife. Actually it did. It was an amazing thing. The Vietnamese knew for months ahead exactly how long it took to get that flower to open at a particular moment.

LC: That's amazing.

JM: Isn't it? My good wife has written a short story on this. It was never published, but I think it's a wonderful thing, describing this dinner and this plant because actually it's a unique phenomenon in my life, in our lives.

LC: That's remarkable.

JM: But it shows—that's just an indication of how close we were to Colonel Nam. I'll also mention another personal incident. When Jorden was there I gave a dinner at our house in his honor and Colonel Nam was the principal guest. Our cook, our Vietnamese cook, who was just so-so as far as family meals were concerned, he never showed much imagination and never offered us anything particularly fascinating. He wasn't bad, but he was nothing to brag about. But whenever we had guests he always produced on his own volition an outstanding meal. That evening, I've always remembered this, we had roast pigeon. This was one of his specialties for guests, roast pigeon stuffed with pork sausage. When it was served and Colonel Nam tasted it, I happened to be looking at him. He took a bite and turned to me and shook his head affirmatively in great approval. I guess that shows what kind of a cultivated individual not only in a cultural sense but also in a food sense that he was.

LC: Now you mention that he was an older gentleman. Do you know anything about his background or his—?

JM: Well, since he was a colonel he obviously had been in the Vietnamese armed forces. I suspect he was in the French forces before the French relinquished control in 1954. I'm not sure of that, but I'm sure he must have been since he had the rank of colonel. Now the next thing I want to mention with respect to him personally is that two months after this he, as he did every weekend, went out to a little cottage he had along the Saigon River for the weekend. He was captured by the Viet Cong, the Vietnamese

communists. Every protuberance on his body was sliced off and his mutilated body was found in the Saigon River within a short time thereafter. A great tragedy as far as everybody in South Vietnam was concerned. A big state funeral was held in his honor. At the very moment of that funeral, Sen. Stuart Symington of Washington was in town and an appointment had been arranged for him to call on President Diem. Though Ambassador Nolting usually accompanied prominent senators on such calls he asked me to accompany Symington to the call on President Diem. Nolting decided to join the funeral procession behind Colonel Nam. My wife was already in that representing me. She marched right from—with all the Vietnamese. I think there were thousands of Vietnamese in the procession. She marched with them from the site of the funeral to the burial site. While this procession was in progress she was joined by Ambassador Nolting. This was a very moving occasion. I've long felt that if President Diem had been in a really effective military leader—political leader, excuse me—at this moment when there was, I think, unanimous support and unanimous anti-communist sentiment, if he had been an effective political leader he could have rallied the country behind him much more than he ever succeeded in doing. But that is my personal view, but that wasn't Diem's political personality, unfortunately.

LC: Do you know who represented him at the funeral procession?

JM: No, but the government was extremely well represented. I don't think Nhu was there but he may have been. I don't recall that he was.

LC: Joe, can you venture a date for this?

JM: It was in October of 1961.

LC: October of 1961.

JM: Yes, sometime in October. I can't remember whether it was early or middle of the month, probably toward the middle.

LC: Certainly this was very sad as you had a close personal relationship with him. Was he married?

JM: Yes. That was the next thing I wanted to tell. His wife was very traditionally old Vietnamese. She did not speak any French and obviously no English so it was rather difficult. We couldn't get into direct communication with her. We always spoke French with Colonel Nam. Since we didn't know Vietnamese we could not talk to

her. But on social occasions, contrary to what a lot of the old traditional Vietnamese women did, absent themselves from official contacts for foreigners, she never did. She was always at the dinners that he gave. She came to our dinners. She came, among other things, to the tea that Nonie offered for Lady Bird Johnson with Madame Nhu as the principal Vietnamese guest. I'll have to mention this personal incident, too, about Madame Nam. In December of 1960 my wife's parents arrived for a visit of several weeks. My wife at one point had a tea to introduce her mother to Vietnamese ladies and among them was Madame Nam. At one point during the tea Nonie's mother came to her and said, "Oh, I think that lady is sick. She's spitting into something." As it turned out she was a betelnut chewer and she was spitting out the betelnut juice. She called one of the servants so she could spit out the juice into something. That shows how traditional a Vietnamese lady she was.

LC: She certainly was, very much so.

JM: Another thing that shows how traditional she was, before the funeral, which took place, I think relatively soon after the death, but there were at least several hours, maybe a day between the time the body was recovered and the funeral was held. My wife went over to what we would call the viewing. Madame Nam, in traditional Buddhist mourning, was dressed totally in white. She was engaging in ritual wailing as she walked around the casket during this whole viewing.

LC: Wow. That's amazing.

JM: These are interesting tidbits as well.

LC: Yes. Did you go to that or just Nonie?

JM: No. I think just Nonie went to the viewing. I had expected to march in the procession at the funeral, but I got this last minute order from the ambassador to accompany Symington to the call on President Diem.

LC: Well, this certainly was a loss and as you say, an opportunity perhaps missed by President Diem.

JM: Unfortunately I feel so.

LC: Mm-hmm. Can you tell me about the—I imagine it was a courtesy call by Senator Symington?

JM: Well, I'm going to get to this, Laura. The Symington one was not of any

real consequence in a substantive way. I think Diem did what he often does. As I recall now, he got out his great big maps, which he would spread on the floor I think, and start showing details of actions by his armed forces against the communists, which were almost always—maybe successful, maybe not, but—really trivial in a sense in the grand scheme of things because they're not decisive engagements in any way whatsoever.

LC: But a distraction.

JM: That's right. But I don't think Symington had anything special that he was pushing on Diem at that stage. A number of the other visitors, which we'll get to, certainly did.

LC: Okay. Let me ask, Joe, if I can here. This is—

JM: Laura, I mentioned the blue book. Excuse me for interrupting you, but that blue book, or white book I guess we called it, rather than blue book, the white book on Vietnam was published in December of 1961 in connection with major policy decisions by the U.S. government to greatly increase its military support of the South Vietnamese government. We can get to that a little later, too, but I just wanted to wind up the link of the white book to major decisions by Kennedy.

LC: How long was Mr. Jorden actually in Saigon?

JM: I would say somewhere between a week and two. I can't remember precisely. He gathered all the information he needed in that length of time and a lot of it was reflected in the white book.

LC: This event predates Colonel Nam's death, but certainly is in that same vein. I understand that Ambassador Nolting was the target of perhaps a half-hearted assassination attempt in July 1961. Do you remember anything about that?

JM: Very vaguely, Laura. I have not remembered it at all until you mentioned it. I do remember this and I can't remember the circumstances now, but I do remember that there was some kind of an attempt, which he always downplayed.

LC: Yes. That sounds as if it was very consonant with his nature.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Okay. Okay. Can you tell me anything, Joe, if you remember, about the Staley mission during the summer of 1961?

JM: Yes. I do remember the Staley mission which was an economic one which I

believe—well, it was designed in part to show the Kennedy administration's support of the Diem government. I think it was also related to our policy efforts to induce the South Vietnamese government to devalue the piaster which was seriously overvalued and therefore draining our aid program in what we felt was an unnecessary manner. I think it was connected with that. I will mention in that connection that I think it was in July of '61, which was as you indicated the month of the Staley mission, that one evening the embassy, at Ambassador Durbrow's direction, and the AID mission had arranged a meeting with Thuan and Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho at the dinner at the home of one of the economic officers as I recall. Durbrow asked me to go and, of course, the AID mission director who was concurrently the economic counselor, Arthur Gardiner, was there. The purpose of that dinner was to try to push the Vietnamese government toward adopting a devaluation of the piaster. This is a minor thing, but after the dinner Durbrow turned to me and said, "You draft the cable to Washington reporting the outcome of this." That turned out to be a minor to-do between me and the economic section because the economic section felt slighted since Durbrow had asked me to draft the cable rather than the economic section. I remember Arthur Gardiner at one point, he and I were good friends, reproached me for doing this. I said, "Well, I was directed by the ambassador to do it. What could I do?" Even though this was an economic matter, not really within the purview of the political section, I drafted the cable, which Durbrow approved. We cleared it, of course, with the economic section, but that always stuck as a bit in the craw of some of the economic officers. I don't think I was beloved in that section.

LC: Oh, okay. Although, as I recall from our earlier conversations, you had begun your very well respected work doing economic analysis.

JM: Oh, yeah. I did a lot of economic work.

LC: So you were not out of your depth, that's certain.

JM: No. No. No.

LC: Although the turf battles sometimes don't recognize that. But just to clarify, that was—

JM: That was the Staley mission. That's what you wanted me to address.

LC: Yeah.

JM: I don't think that mission ever cut very much ice. It was considered fairly

important at the moment. I can't remember what else it even dealt with. I'm not even sure it did deal with the devaluation question that I suspect it did, but I can't remember what else it did do.

LC: I don't know whether this might jog any memories or whether in fact this is actually accurate, but I've been led to think that their primary mission was in fact to shift some of the cost of potential increase in the South Vietnamese military, which was being discussed at that time, shifted away from the United States to South Vietnam. That might have actually been done.

JM: Well, that closely relates to devaluation.

LC: Yes. It might have been done exactly through the devaluation.

JM: Yeah, because if the piaster was devalued then the U.S. would have to furnish fewer dollars to cover piaster expenditures, which is what the military budget, the currency used in the South Vietnamese military budget, of course.

LC: Exactly. Now during the summer, did you see much more of Wolf Ladejinsky, I should ask after—?

JM: Well, I think we encountered him from time to time, but I think he ceased coming to the house completely.

LC: Okay. During the summer of 1961 and the beginning of the fall, did Walt Rostow come out to Saigon?

JM: We can get into that. I think he was a member of General Taylor's mission.

LC: Yes. I think that's correct.

JM: We can get into that. I'll lead up to that.

LC: Okay. Excellent. Go ahead, Joe, whatever you think.

JM: That was the next subject that I thought was appropriate to discuss and that is the various high-level missions to Vietnam, which came out from Washington, usually on behalf of President Kennedy himself. Aside from the Staley one, which you raised, the next one in chronological order, was the Maxwell Taylor mission in October of 1961. Now this mission, I think Walt Rostow was the number two on that mission, and I believe that—I'm trying to think of his name, the fellow who was the head of the Vietnam—Sterling Cottrell, who was the head of the Vietnam Working Group in the State Department who at that point I think had been attached directly to the assistant secretary

for Far Eastern Affairs, as it was then known. I'm not sure whether Harriman had taken over for McConaughy at that point. He probably had, but I'm not sure. Cottrell was number three in that mission. So this was a very high-powered mission which stayed in-country for quite some time. I don't remember exactly how long, and which subsequently led to major revisions in the U.S. military support of the South Vietnamese.

LC: Joe, if you can, maybe we should start by just getting some sense of the players in that mission. If you could, begin with Mr. Cottrell and anything you can say about his background.

JM: Well, Cottrell before he—he was a career Foreign Service officer, who before he was named as the director of the Vietnam Working Group, which was raised from a simple desk status to attachment directly to the assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, Cottrell had previously been the political advisor to the commander-in-chief for the Pacific in Honolulu. He, I think, spent at least a couple of years there. I don't recall what his Foreign Service experience had been prior to that time. But as political advisor to CINCPAC (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command), to use the acronym for that office, he certainly was well acquainted with what was going on in Vietnam. Because almost every cable that went out of Saigon was repeated to—every cable to Washington was repeated to Honolulu except maybe a few of the most sensitive. So he was well versed on Vietnam when he took over the Vietnam Working Group.

LC: Okay. What about Walt Rostow?

JM: Rostow was at that time I think still the number two to McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor. He subsequently moved over the State Department to head the Policy Planning Staff, but I don't believe that move had occurred at that stage.

LC: Had you had any interactions with him before he arrived in Saigon?

JM: No, not before he arrived in Saigon, but I certainly did talk to him while he was there.

LC: Okay. General Taylor, of course, is a very important figure, not just in the Kennedy administration but of course earlier in the Joint Chiefs of Staff and so on. Do you have any observations you can offer about him?

JM: Well, this, I think, was my initial contact with General Taylor. I had quite a number subsequently. He came to dislike me intensely for policy reasons as the years

wore on.

LC: I hope that you'll tell us why that was. Then you can state what actually happened and why he was misinformed.

JM: I believe Taylor at that stage was still—I'm sure he was—still Special Assistant to the President for Counter-insurgency. I think it was—I don't remember when but sometime later, maybe even more than a year later that he moved over to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

LC: Okay, Joe. Let's take a break here.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [18] of [57]
Date: May 13, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. We are continuing the oral history interview for the Oral History Project of the archive. The interview is with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today's date is the thirteenth of May 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the interview room of the Special Collections Building. The ambassador is at his home in Nevada and we're speaking by telephone. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, you mentioned that you might like to insert one correction here.

JM: Yes. As I recall, the last time that you conducted an interview I indicated that the meeting which Ambassador Durbrow wanted us to set up and we did set up for him and the director of USOM, Arthur Gardiner, and myself, a dinner meeting with the vice president of Vietnam, Nguyen Ngoc Tho and with Nguyen Dinh Thuan who was the secretary of state for the presidency and in effect the chief of staff of the White House in Saigon, I think I indicated that took place in July of 1961. That would have been an impossible date. I know that dinner meeting was at the instigation of Ambassador Durbrow and he had already left in early May. The meeting must have taken place in March or April of '61 before he left. I checked the official Foreign Relations volume. I couldn't find anything in there on that. Incidentally, that stimulated my interest in that volume. I read all the way through, I think, the 1961 one, or most of it and not all of it, but a great deal of it.

LC: Did you?

JM: I would like to say on this devaluation question we were not successful at all that night in getting the Vietnamese to go along. Actually, the final decision, of course, would have been made by President Diem. Diem's basic opposition to any change in the exchange rate between the Vietnamese piaster and the dollar was mainly influenced by the fact that the Cambodian riel was quoted at thirty-five to the dollar. He didn't want the piaster to appear any weaker than the Cambodian riel. This shows his sensitivity with regard to anything that could possibly indicate that Vietnam was not as strong as

Cambodia. As I think you know, the Vietnamese looked down upon the Cambodians as the inferior government and people. The Cambodians bitterly resented this superiority attitude so there was never any love lost. But Diem under no circumstances wanted to make it appear that the Vietnamese were in any way inferior to Cambodia. I think this was the basic underlying psychological factor in his refusal to agree to any devaluation. Checking through the 1961 official volume from the State Department on U.S. relations with Vietnam, I saw that this question persisted throughout. It was an important question for this reason. We became much more interested as Diem was interested in building up their armed forces. That required additional piasters. The United States did not want to keep pumping in enormous sums of additional aid at that stage. So the only way to get additional piasters would be to increase the number of piasters per dollar, which required a change in the exchange rate. I saw from checking through the official volume on our relations with Vietnam that the question was not settled until many, many months later toward the end of the year by a sort of artificial device which in a sense veiled the change in exchange rate. I've forgotten what the details were now. Anyway, it was a problem that was important because it affected security, but it didn't get worked out for a long time between us and the Vietnamese.

LC: President Diem saw this in terms of the international status of South Vietnam?

JM: Exactly.

LC: Okay. Were there other issues like that that the United States saw in economic terms that he might have seen in terms of prestige that you recall?

JM: Well, no. In this sense and this wasn't so much prestige as his feeling about his position among the Vietnamese people. His attitude was very much influenced by his desire to give no indication to his people that the United States was running Vietnam, that he was very much in charge of a sovereign nation, which in a way was a good attitude, but it did handicap the effectiveness of the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship at many points because his government did not operate very efficiently. Infusion of American knowhow into that government would have been a great help. Later, after Diem was replaced much later, we were able to develop this relationship to a much more effective level. I think that was the reason that ultimately by 1970 or '71 the guerilla war was won in Vietnam,

but not the conventional war. Diem's attitude, which had a lot to be said for from the standpoint of not appearing to be a puppet of the United States and thus feeding the propaganda machine of the North Vietnamese, in the end I think really handicapped the course of the war.

LC: Joe, one of the larger questions that perhaps will help us segue to the Taylor mission in late 1961 involves the background of U.S.-Soviet relations. Of course, these are developing under the Kennedy administration with a lot of gusto in early 1961. Do you have any observations to make that you could offer about the broader climate?

JM: Yes, in this sense. Kennedy met with Khrushchev on his first official bilateral meeting with him in Vienna in the summer of 1961. Khrushchev succeeded, I think, in walking all over Kennedy at that meeting, largely because of Kennedy's basic inexperience in foreign relations, his understanding of it. He had been a senator. He had never been involved deeply in the conduct of our foreign relations in contrast to Nixon who was his opponent in the election in 1960 and who had been vice president for eight years under Eisenhower and had been rather deeply involved in foreign affairs, including have met with Khrushchev in Russia in I think it was 1959 and getting involved in an argument with him there. I think Nixon held up very well in that argument. Khrushchev, I think, was also influenced by the fact that Kennedy, as a young, inexperienced president had not backed up the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba with any U.S. force. I think Khrushchev interpreted that as a weakness on the part of Kennedy, which I think in the ultimate analysis it was, and decided that he could walk all over Kennedy at the meeting in Berlin in 1961. The only agreement that came out of that meeting was the one attempt to neutralize Laos, the Lao problem, but that in my view ultimately led to our loss of the war in Vietnam. The Russians never effectively held up their end of the bargain, which was to restrain the North Vietnamese from using Laos as the corridor of infiltration of men and material from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. So the whole neutralization thing was really a serious deal. Yet the United States, under Kennedy and Johnson as presidents, never changed this policy with respect to the use of U.S. forces in Laos. The only thing we did was to use air power against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, which was largely ineffective in terms of results as far as infiltration was concerned. We never introduced any ground forces into Laos, which was contrary to the advice which

Eisenhower had given to Kennedy when he turned over the presidency in January of 1961 that Laos was the strategic key to Southeast Asia. I think Eisenhower was absolutely right. Kennedy and Johnson never understood this and never changed our policy.

LC: And never revisited that Geneva agreement on Laos.

JM: Well, yes. That's what I'm getting at. They never changed the policy with respect to Laos even though the Soviets had not held up their end of the bargain to which Harriman, who conducted the negotiations on the Lao neutralization in Geneva. Harriman attached a great deal of importance to the assurances he got from the chief of the Russian delegation, Pushkin, on this very point. That was the basis on which the agreement was negotiated. The Soviets never held up their end of the bargain. They may not have been in a position to do so. They may not have had that much influence with the North Vietnamese. I'm not sure they did. But that again was a foolish interpretation of where power really lay on the part of Kennedy and Johnson.

LC: That's very interesting. Joe, take us to October 1961, if you will, and the Taylor mission. We talked just a little bit about this at the end of our last session and you noted at that time that Maxwell Taylor, Walt Rostow and Sterling Cottrell were all involved. You gave us a little background on Mr. Cottrell. Could you say something about Walt Rostow first of all, just who he was and what you encountered from him?

JM: Yes. Rostow was [later] the head of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department. He had come into the government when Kennedy became president from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he was a professor, a very well known professor of economics. I think he had already published his famous book on the revolution of rising expectations, which made his—that gave him an international name in economics. He came into the government as head of the Policy Planning Staff. Therefore he was the number two in the Taylor mission. Later Rostow, when McGeorge Bundy resigned as the national security advisor to Johnson in, I think 1965, Johnson then chose Rostow to replace Bundy. Actually, I may be mistaken there, Laura. I think maybe Rostow came in initially as the deputy national security advisor to Bundy and then switched to the State Department as head of the Policy Planning Staff.

LC: I think that's right.

JM: I think that's the way it went. Then later Johnson, in 1965, made him the

national security advisor when McGeorge Bundy resigned. Rostow remained in that position throughout Johnson's terms as president and until Johnson left office in January of '69. Interestingly, because Rostow was closely associated with the Vietnam policy of Johnson which ultimately failed and which was attacked so strongly in academic circles, when Rostow became available again for an academic appointment when Johnson left the presidency, none of the prestigious universities in the East were willing to hire him. So he went to I think it was the University of Texas, was it not?

LC: I believe so.

JM: Yeah. Where Johnson undoubtedly had influence of his own and got Rostow a very good appointment there. The University of Texas certainly at that stage didn't have the prestige of MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) or a lot of the other institutions in the East which refused to have anything to do with Rostow. That's an interesting early commentary on academia, which has its own echoes today with respect to Iraq.

LC: Yes. You're right, Joe. Do you have anyone in particular in mind there?

JM: Oh, I don't have anybody particularly in mind, but what is it, ninety percent of academics are now Democrats and scarcely give the Republicans a square deal. I'm willing to say that the academics have destroyed academic freedom by turning out to be so one-sided in their politics and in their conduct of teaching in universities.

LC: Well, that's certainly a very hot issue here as well as elsewhere across the country.

JM: Yes. I'm sure. I have pretty strong feelings on that.

LC: Yes. Yes. I can tell. I think that's not a bad thing. Joe, can you tell me, had you met Rostow—

JM: Let me say just one more thing, Laura, on the issue you raised before.

LC: Of course.

JM: On relations with the Soviets. By that time the Soviet Union's relations to China were beginning to deteriorate rather seriously and I think we were beginning to recognize it. But with respect to Vietnam the Soviet Union-Chinese Communist split never really played to our advantage in the war in Vietnam because both because of their rivalry supported North Vietnam in its war against South Vietnam and later against us.

Communist China permitted the Soviets to ship arms through China to Vietnam. Some were delivered by sea but a lot went by surface from the Soviet Union down through China. So even though they were great rivals in a geopolitical sense at that stage, it did not work to our advantage in the war in Vietnam at all.

LC: Do you think that's something that U.S. diplomacy could have exploited?

JM: No. I don't think we could have done anything much more effective in that sense. I became more convinced of that when I learned something that you and I have referred to before, that during the conflict the Chinese communists say they had three hundred thousand troops in North Vietnam in order to free the North Vietnamese to send their forces south. That, plus the fact that the Soviets kept, throughout the war, supplying the North Vietnamese with arms, I don't think there's much that we could—I haven't been able to discern what we could have done more effectively to try to take advantage of the overall split between those two communist powers.

LC: Was there, to your recollection, any thinking within the State Department about the possibility of exploiting the Sino-Soviet split, at least in the Vietnam theater with regard to the situation in South Vietnam or Hanoi support?

JM: I can't say that I was aware of such consideration. There undoubtedly was but I think the conclusion may have been the same as mine. I can't see how we could effectively have done it. With the Cultural Revolution in progress domestically in China and the fact that both wanted to try to influence North Vietnam to adhere to its side in the split, I don't see how until the Nixon administration began to take advantage of the split in 1971, I guess is when they started, '70 or '71. The reason that that became possible was because of the 1969 armed, shall I call it, dust-up between the Soviets and the Chinese communists on the border between the two countries, which was I think probably a pretty sizable battle at that time.

LC: Evidently. I think that's right.

JM: I think it was the thing that finally Mao had been unreservedly hostile to the U.S. until that time. I think this began to change his thinking and to influence his mind to begin to open toward the U.S. Now, he didn't want to do this openly, certainly when the Nixon invasion of Cambodia came up in 1970. He thoroughly supported the communist side in that issue. He didn't want to weaken his position again in the rivalry with the

Soviet Union by taking any public position which would indicate he favored the U.S. But because of his great concern over Soviet strength, vis-à-vis the Chinese communist strength, he ultimately began to look toward an opening toward the U. S. as we did in opening toward China in ’70 or ’71, and hit its top in ’71 or ’72.

LC: Just while we’re on the topic, Joe, does the now really an old saw about Nixon being the only president who probably could have made those overtures successfully to Mao, does that sound right to you in terms of domestic policy?

JM: It does to me, considering the history of the late 1940s and on through the ’50s and the ’60s. The Democrats felt they had suffered grievously from the Chinese Communist takeover in China in the late ’40s. They weren’t about to make any move that could be interpreted as the U.S. extending an olive branch toward China after that. They thought that it would hurt them politically in a domestic sense in the United States. So I agree that Nixon was the only one who could have done that, I think.

LC: It was just too poisonous.

JM: He, because of his strong anti-communist prestige dating from the late ’40s and ’50s certainly could take the heat. Actually it turned out to be more credit than heed, of course, as far as he was concerned.

LC: Well, that’s right, I think. Joe, back in the Democratic fold with regard to Professor Rostow, did you meet him at any time before he came out to Saigon?

JM: No, I had not met him before he came to Saigon. I became acquainted with him there and had some subsequent contact with him, which I can mention later when it becomes pertinent chronologically.

LC: Sure. Tell me about your learning that a mission would come, a high level mission under General Taylor was going to come to Saigon. Do you remember that?

JM: Well, I can’t remember. Laura, I’ll tell you. A lot of things, which reading through the 1961 vial in our relations to Vietnam, came to my mind that I’d utterly forgotten about. Among other things I found that I went once, maybe twice, with General Taylor and our ambassador and Walt Rostow may have been included, too, I’ve forgotten, to meetings with President Diem. I have no recollection at all that I had even gone to those meetings.

LC: Thank goodness for documents.

JM: Exactly. I assume that I was there as the note taker because General Taylor spoke French I'm sure, as did Nolting. So I'm sure that the meetings were conducted in French, which most high American officials could not do but Taylor could do it. So I wasn't needed as an interpreter. So I must have been there as the note taker because I can recall in that same general period, October or November of '61, accompanying both Senator Symington and subsequently Averell Harriman to meetings with Diem, just the two of us, the American personality and myself with Diem because the ambassador had designated me to go and there I had to serve both as interpreter and note taker, of course.

LC: You mentioned when we talked last about the state funeral for Colonel Nam.

JM: That very day was the one I accompanied Senator Symington to call on President Diem.

LC: What about Harriman? Do you recall the context for that meeting at all?

JM: Oh, yes. That one I've kept very much in my mind. I think there may have been more than one Harriman meeting with Diem. Judging from that official volume there were a couple. But I specifically remember one where Harriman was—this was I think in November of '61 where Harriman's purpose was to browbeat Diem into going along with our policy on Laos, even though to sign the agreements that were being negotiated in Geneva, even though Diem was strongly opposed to it because I think he saw the basic geopolitical danger of this much more clearly than [Harriman]. Let me just add at this point, Laura, on this important point of the differences between the U.S. official policy and the South Vietnamese policy as well as the Thai policy with respect to the neutralization of Laos. I think Harriman's purpose in coming out to Southeast Asia at that stage, as I've indicated, was to try to induce both the—not just induce but to browbeat the South Vietnamese and the Thai governments into going along with the policy in signing the agreement. Before the meetings with Diem, this was the very trip in which Harriman, when both Nolting, our ambassador in Vietnam, and Ken Young, our ambassador in Thailand, tried to dissuade Harriman from pursuing the approach he was taking toward the neutralization of Laos. Harriman turned very strongly to both of them, "You're working for President Kennedy. You're not working for God. So get aboard." Nolting himself told me about this session he had with Harriman. Again, there's an interesting parallel. Harriman in effect was conducting himself in the way John Bolton

was reported to conduct himself.

LC: Is that right?

JM: Yes.

LC: Just for context on Bolton is being considered as—

JM: As Bush's ambassador to the U.N.

LC: Right. So the parallel that you draw is attitudinal or personality?

JM: The way one handles oneself in personal relations with, let's say with people who don't hold quite the same high position. After all, Harriman was a more important figure than either Nolting or Young. It's interesting to note that neither one of those ever got another ambassadorial post.

LC: Neither of them?

JM: Neither of them ever got another ambassadorial post.

LC: That's interesting.

JM: Look, while we're on this point, Laura, I can also mention about Harriman's vigorous, I call it vigorous, defense of the policy he had urged on Kennedy and Kennedy had accepted with respect to Laos. Norman Hannah, a fellow Foreign Service officer who was the deputy director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs in the State Department at this particular time, many years later wrote a book called *Key to Failure*, which was the key to our failure in the Vietnam War. He and I agreed that the way the Kennedy administration devised [policy] with respect to Laos was the reason that we ultimately failed in the Vietnam War. He mentions in that book at one stage, I guess he had expressed this in some way and it got to Harriman's ears. He was called into Harriman's office and given a terrific dressing down over this. So again, the analogy between Harriman and Bolton has struck me in recent weeks.

LC: Joe, can you give me a sense of what it was like to be in the room with Harriman? You were a mid-career Foreign Service officer at this point.

JM: Right.

LC: He certainly would have been a well-known figure to you, a public figure. What were your impressions of—

JM: Harriman was an extremely strong personality. I remember one favorable impression that I got from Harriman early on was his great effectiveness in handling the

press. I saw this, I think, in Saigon when he met with the press reporters I recall out in the VIP lounge at the airport. He could handle them both strongly and with kid gloves extremely effectively. He was clearly in a dominant position as far as the press was concerned. That impressed me mightily because I'm not sure that I ever had that capability. So I admired Harriman's doing it.

LC: Were you on tenterhooks at all because of his enormous influence in postwar U.S. foreign policy?

JM: No. I can't say I was on tenterhooks. Actually, in the earlier years that Harriman was there, particularly after he took over as the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs in December of 1961. He was still conducting the negotiations in Geneva at that time, too, over Laos, which were intermittent. Negotiations were not conducted constantly. Harriman became increasingly skeptical about the ability of Diem to win the war. He became very much anti-Diem. Since I had reached that stage, too, Harriman and I saw pretty much eye-to-eye on Diem except on the question of the significance of Laos as far as the war was concerned. There I differed very much with Harriman. But on his general attitude with respect to Diem, and of course that became by 1963 a key issue as far as our relations with Vietnam were concerned. In these sessions in which Kennedy presided Harriman was, I felt, one of my allies in my attitude to the extent in which I participated in those sessions where there were other important figures that we'll get to later who were strongly opposed to my attitude, as well as Harriman's.

LC: How did Harriman treat you, Joe?

JM: I never had any great personal complaints as to his treatment of me. I guess I never voiced this skepticism to him over Laos.

LC: Over Laos. Right. Right. Did you—

JM: So I wasn't in his bad, bad book. I was going to get to this later. When we came back from Vietnam to Washington in the summer of 1962, Harriman actually invited my wife and me to dinner at his Georgetown residence. It was a big dinner so it wasn't just for us at all. I don't have very good memories of that dinner, not so much because of Harriman but because of the brash, young Kennedy-ites who were there who took utterly no interest in Vietnam whatsoever. To give you a couple of examples of who they were, one was Abraham Chase, a Harvard law professor who was then the legal

advisor in the State Department, the legal advisor and the head of the legal division. Another was Jim Greenfield who was the deputy assistant secretary for press relations. They, to me, typified the brashness and the arrogance of the young men brought in by Kennedy to government who thought that all of the policies that had been pursued by the U.S. before within foreign relations were for the birds. That everything that they were going to work out would serve in a fine-and-dandy fashion, which I don't think turned out to be the case.

LC: They didn't listen to anything on Vietnam?

JM: No. They were not interested in it. I could see that, even though that was obviously the reason that Nonie and I had been invited by Harriman in this interim because of my experience in Vietnam.

LC: Well, they I'm sure came to care about it later.

JM: I'll tell you another person who exhibited the same attitude early on was George Ball. George Ball in September, I think of 1961, when he was the head of the economic affairs in the State Department, I've forgotten what his title was but he was in effect I think probably the number three official at that stage in the State Department. He decided that he would convene a meeting in Hong Kong of all of the economic counselors in our embassies in East Asia, as well as the heads of the AID missions. He also threw in that the political counselor should come, too. Incidentally, the cost of that particular conference meant that the home leave for everybody in East Asia was deferred for a year because they spent so much money on the conference. That's neither here nor there. This was a month before General Taylor's special mission at Kennedy's request on Vietnam. During this conference I never saw the slightest sign that Ball had any interest in the evolving Vietnam situation at all. He never raised it during this meeting whatsoever.

LC: What were the principle driving issues?

JM: Well, I think since he was the head of economic affairs obviously the meeting itself was focused on economics and aid programs. One would have thought with the seriously emerging Vietnam problem that if not in the official meeting at least in the corridors he would have discussed it with Arthur Gardiner and me, but there was no indication of that. I understand now why. When Ball later became the number two in the

State Department in the subsequent years he was, of course, the chief dovish proponent with respect to [the U.S. policy in] Vietnam in the State Department. That became pretty widely known in the government. I could see in my own later contacts with Ball that his focus was totally on Europe and not really on Asia at all as a significant political factor as far as the U.S. was concerned as Europe was. He was almost totally European oriented. I have really no respect for George Ball whatsoever. The more contact I had with him the less I had for him because of this what I call tunnel vision.

LC: Was it that he couldn't stretch do you think or he just didn't give a darn?

JM: I think his experience had all been with respect to Europe. Well, you know, there were a lot of important Americans then who looked almost completely to Europe, despite the fact that we'd fought a war with Japan as well as with Germany. The focus of America then was, I think still, very much more on Europe than it was on Asia, the focus of what we call the elite.

LC: Absolutely. Yes. I think that's right. Joe, with regard to the Taylor mission, tell me what you can about the early days of the mission, when it first arrived if you recall anything about that.

JM: Laura, I cannot recall much in the way of details. I probably sat in on some meetings in the ambassador's office. As I indicated I evidently accompanied the high officials to a couple of the meetings with Diem. I do remember talking to Cottrell and Rostow, I think individually. I don't think I ever talked to General Taylor individually. Taylor, to me, is a very interesting individual.

LC: Yes. I agree.

JM: He was a military intellectual, which was rather rare among the military, as you know. He wrote his famous book. What was it? Something about the trumpet. I've forgotten what it was, but he was critical of our almost total focus in terms of military strategy on nuclear weapons. He thought that because of the kind of danger we were faced with we should place greater emphasis on the army than was being placed at the time. I think he was right in that respect. He also was, as I've indicated, fluent in French, which is also unusual among our military. During that mission to Vietnam among other things he played tennis, I think at least a couple of times with General Big Minh.

LC: Yes. I think there's a very famous photograph of them talking.

JM: That's right. He obviously had some very fine qualities. He later, of course, when the crisis arose over Diem he was on the pro-Diem side and I was on the anti-. So he clearly didn't like me from then on. I had some subsequent contacts with him when he was extremely cool, but this wasn't true in October of '61. These developed later just as my relations with McNamara developed in the same way, which we can get to later. This is about 1963.

LC: Yes. We absolutely will. Joe, can you say a little bit about the thrust of the mission, its purview, its brief?

JM: Well, when the mission left to go back to Washington I knew in general what its recommendations were going to be. Taylor had pretty well decided—I think maybe he hadn't reached his final decision—because of the floods of the Mekong in southern Vietnam that the kind of relief that was required there could be used as cover to justify the introduction of, I've forgotten whether it was a battalion or a regiment of American troops into that area, which is where the insurgency was strong at that point. It had not yet reached a serious stage in central Vietnam. Well, it had begun to reach a serious stage in central Vietnam, but it had just recently begun to develop there. It had been strong in the Mekong Delta area for several years.

LC: Yes.

JM: So he thought this could be used as cover to bring in some U.S. troops. As it turned out, of course, Kennedy was opposed to putting any U.S. troops in [at that time], but he did agree to the very substantial increase, not only of American advisors from about a thousand to sixteen or seventeen thousand, but also to the, shall I call it the veiled introduction of American helicopters, planes and so forth in support of the Vietnamese. If this kind of thing were conducted today the Bush administration would be blasted off the earth for keeping a lot of this kind of thing secret, but that was the way Kennedy very substantially increased our military role in Vietnam. This was an outgrowth of the Taylor mission.

LC: Joe, how much discussion was there of the 1954 Geneva agreements, which of course as you have noted in these interviews we were not signatory to, but there were limits there.

JM: Well, I assume there was some discussion of that during the Taylor mission

visit, but it certainly remained an important issue I could tell from reading through the 1961 volume on U.S. relations in Vietnam, remained an important issue at high levels in the U.S. government. One of the things that happened in the fall of ’61 in this connection was that President Kennedy sent out Bill Jorden. Did I mention this before?

LC: Yes you did. This is the *New York Times*.

JM: He sent out Bill Jorden to prepare in effect a blue book on the violations of the Geneva accords by the North Vietnamese and that any violations that could be attributed to us were warranted by the fact that the North Vietnamese had previously done it. They were necessary in order to counter those violations. Throughout ’61 and early ’62 we kept trying to at least present some semblance of an explanation or reason as to why it was basically the North Vietnamese violations which brought about our subsequent introduction of enhancement of our military personnel in Vietnam who in many respects remained in an advisory function. But there were as I indicated some veiled, as I put it, veiled introduction of helicopters, planes, and pilots into Vietnam at that stage. But it remained a very active issue in ’61 and ’62 and I think even on probably into ’63. There were many talks with the Indians for example, and the Canadians, over what we were doing.

LC: Both of whom, both countries were—

JM: A lot of which I was unaware of at the time, I think, and certainly I wouldn’t have had it in mind if I hadn’t have reread that ’61 volume and I guess the first half of ’62.

LC: Just as a point of reference, both India and Canada

JM: India was the chairman of the International Control Commission, which had been established by the Geneva Accords of ’54 on Vietnam, with Canada and Poland as the other two members.

LC: Now, would those talks on the U.S. side have been handled through MACV or at that point MAAG, the MAAG office?

JM: No, no. With India, no, no. The political section handled them in Vietnam with the ICC, the International Control Commission, the ICC. There were many approaches to the Indian government by our ambassador who was then Galbraith in India, and also some in Washington to the Indian ambassador. I wasn’t aware of all these until I

reread it to refresh my memory.

LC: Well, it's very instructive to get the sort of sense of concurrent approaches being made across the globe, really, about Vietnam issues that perhaps even someone in a as senior of an office as you held in Saigon didn't know all the pieces of.

JM: No, no, not at all. I think our ambassador may have known many more because I think a lot of the messages were made for "eyes only" for him, some of which I saw but a number of which I—a lot of things I read about I was not aware of there.

LC: That must be an interesting feeling, too, going back and reading those volumes.

JM: Oh, it is. As I say, I got so absorbed I read all of '61 and half of '62.

LC: Well, then you'll be prepared for our next session and I guess we'll pause here for today.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [19] of [57]
Date: May 20, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twentieth of May 2005. I am in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock. Joe is speaking to me by telephone as he usually does from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, I wonder, do you recall anything about Edward Lansdale being part of the Taylor team that came to Saigon?

JM: No, I do not specifically recall. As I have found out reading through the 1961 volume of the *U.S. Foreign Relations with Vietnam* that he was a member of that mission, but I had not recalled that he was. So I don't recall that I saw him at all. Not that I think he would have called on me anyway because I think he and I were on very different planes as far as our U.S. relationship with Diem was concerned by that stage.

LC: Last time we talked a little bit about Cottrell as the State Department representative on the team, and I wonder if it gave you any pause for thought, the fact that Cottrell was selected and this has less to do with his career than with his seniority at the time relative to other members of the mission.

JM: No. I certainly wasn't surprised he was a member of the mission because he was the head of the Vietnam, I don't know what they called it, working group, task force, or what. I think by that stage, maybe it was later, but I think by that stage he was reporting directly to the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs as the head of the Vietnam, let's say task force.

LC: Now was that Harriman at this point?

JM: No. I don't think Harriman came in as the assistant secretary until December. I think it was still McConaughy.

LC: Okay. But the issue—

JM: I don't know whether it was Harriman who attached that Vietnam task force directly to him or whether that had happened earlier. I just don't recall. It was no

surprise that [Cottrell] was the State Department representative on the group. That's assuming that Walt Rostow had not yet moved over from being deputy national security advisor to head of the Policy Planning Staff. I'm not sure just when that took place.

LC: Of course, anyone could go ahead and check on that date. So the issue of the level at which the State Department was represented was not a bothersome thing at all.

JM: No. No.

LC: Okay. Let me ask you a little bit, then, about Taylor's proposals that emerged from the trip. Can you speak about those and what you know about those?

JM: Well, Taylor recommended that I believe it was a battalion of U.S. forces be introduced into the Mekong Delta area in Vietnam under cover of the need for flood relief because the Mekong was in full flood at the time we were there. There was considerable damage in the area. So Taylor's device for trying to introduce U.S. troops without creating a major furor, actually as I think is certainly known publicly, Kennedy did not accept that recommendation. He decided not to put any U.S. forces of that sort into Vietnam, let's say fighting troops of any nature, but he did decide by December as I recall, Kennedy, that is, decided to increase the number of U.S military personnel in Vietnam from about a thousand to about seventeen thousand, as I recall the figure, which was certainly a major step up in the U.S. commitment to Vietnam, which as far as I was concerned at that time was just fine. I believed in it very much at that stage and still do, as a matter of fact. But I think that the fact that Kennedy made this very major decision to increase the U.S. forces, not only because of the numbers involved which represented a huge increase, but also because of the nature of the types of forces who were brought in, both airplanes with pilots and helicopters with pilots. Which though they were not publicly acknowledged as directly engaging in fighting, actually did to a very substantial extent. This decision by Kennedy means that the subsequent Democratic effort in the U.S. to portray the commitment to Vietnam as very much a Republican one under Eisenhower when we decided to back Diem in 1954 and '55, but Eisenhower never had more than—not even a thousand, less than a thousand U.S. military personnel in Vietnam. The Democrats certainly greatly increased that commitment so that in a domestic political sense I think the Democrats shared a responsibility with the Republicans. As a matter of fact, it was the Democrats who eventually took us into the

war in Vietnam, partly on the basis of Kennedy's decision at that time. Of course, subsequently Lyndon Johnson's decision to greatly increase the number of U.S. forces and to introduce directly ground forces into Vietnam after—he waited until after the 1964 election to do it, but then he did it in 1965. The Democrats bear, I think, an even greater responsibility for taking us into the war in Vietnam. I'm not criticizing the decision. What I do criticize is the fact that they took us in and then reversed their support when the war was not going as well as they had anticipated and eventually, with some Republican acquiescence and support, dropped our commitment to Vietnam in the '70s. Now I might add while I'm talking about Kennedy's responsibility in this connection that his brother, Robert Kennedy, who was on a special mission to Indonesia to try to settle the question of the fate of West Irian, which is west New Guinea, which was then a Dutch possession and which the Indonesians wanted to acquire. We had intervened in a major way to try to reach a settlement between the Dutch and Indonesians over this. He came back with the recommendation that West Irian go to Indonesia, which is the way it did go, to the irritation, if not stronger, of the Dutch. Now on the way back from Indonesia to the States, Robert Kennedy stopped one evening for about an hour in Saigon. We knew he was coming and all the senior staff of the American mission in Vietnam embassy—it was still MAAG at that stage, the AID mission and so on, all were gathered in the VIP lounge at the airport in Saigon to meet with Kennedy. He heard some reports from us. Then at the conclusion he made a ringing, very ringing declaration that the United States will stay here until we have won. This was such a significant declaration that I think I went back to the embassy and drafted a telegram and sent it to Washington as to what he had said. That to me, together with Kennedy's decision, certainly settles in my mind the question as to whether President Kennedy would have stayed in Vietnam or would have withdrawn. That's still debated. Some of the Kennedy supporters say that he would have withdrawn and would not have made the major commitment of troops that Johnson eventually made. I don't believe it myself. I think Kennedy would have stayed, but both—because he had already made a very important commitment by increasing the U.S. forces and changed the nature of those military forces in Vietnam. His brother made this ringing positive declaration that we'll be there until we win.

LC: Joe, let—

JM: Subsequently of course [Robert Kennedy] changed his mind for domestic political reasons.

LC: Yes, he did. Joe, let me ask you just a little bit about that trip. Certainly you were there. Was Arthur Gardiner there as well that day?

JM: Yes, I'm sure. I don't remember specifically. You mean at the airport at the lounge?

LC: Yes.

JM: I'm sure Arthur was there.

LC: Who else would have been there? Was the press present at all?

JM: No. This was not a meeting open to the public.

LC: Did he make any public statements while he was there?

JM: No. I don't recall that he did.

LC: Was it essentially a drop-in that was not publicized then at all by the Republicans?

JM: I do not recall whether it became known to the public. I assume that it did. I don't think there was an attempt to keep it secret, but because it was such a hasty, fast, short meeting as I recall—now I couldn't swear to this, Laura—I don't think the press was involved in any way. Now, possibly it was. That would have to be checked in the historical record because I'm sure the press was quite aware that he was going to Indonesia what his mission was there. I suspect he had some press people with him because people in his capacity usually traveled with a certain number of press, but again I don't recall, Laura, whether he did or not.

LC: There is a photo of Robert Kennedy at Tan Son Nhut Airport meeting with Ngo Dinh Nhu. Did that happen on this occasion? Were there any Vietnamese there?

JM: I don't recall that he met with Nhu there. Perhaps he did. I don't recall and I don't think it was in the *Foreign Relations* for '61 I just read through, I don't think there was any indication.

LC: That must have been a later trip that he made there.

JM: I'm not aware that he ever made a later trip. Perhaps he did, but I'm not aware, but I couldn't swear that he didn't.

LC: I'll have to look up that photograph. I've seen it relatively recently.

JM: That doesn't strike any bells with me at all, Laura.

LC: I'll look it up and maybe give you some information about it later. I just wondered whether that was this occasion or another one.

JM: I wouldn't think so, but again, I could be wrong.

LC: Well, it's very interesting that he made that statement. I wonder whether you found your memo that you drafted, your cable, in *FRUS*. Did you see it there?

JM: You know, Laura, I should remember that, but I can't.

LC: Well, I'll run and check. Now I have a lot of things to do. I'll run and check that as well. I just wondered if you remembered seeing yourself in *FRUS* in that capacity. I know that—

JM: Well, it wouldn't have shown me as drafter anyway because the way that's done, the cables come in from the field. Of course, they all go out over the ambassador's good name. While the official volume indicates who drafted the documents in Washington, they do not as far as the field is concerned in most cases.

LC: Well, the secondary literature now very much points to the Taylor mission in the same way that you have, that it provoked these decisions in Washington about escalating the commitment.

JM: That's right. I have no doubt of that.

LC: Yeah. I wonder, Joe, if you saw at the time this not only as an increased commitment to preserve South Vietnam, and this may be splitting hairs, but actually a commitment to prevent the fall of South Vietnam.

JM: Well, what's the difference between those two, Laura?

LC: Well, one is putting greater investment into keeping things as they are and the other is making sure that something really catastrophic does not happen. I think there is a little movement there, a little difference, a little shading that I wonder whether you picked up on at all.

JM: Well, certainly there was great concern within the U.S. establishment, not just in Saigon, but in Washington, in the fall of 1961 over the worsening of security conditions in Vietnam. I think that is certainly the context within which the Taylor

mission took place and made its recommendations and the eventual decision of Kennedy were all made. So the very significant outcome of the Taylor mission did derive in part from the second of the scenarios that you just pointed out. On the other hand, as I say, I can't see any great difference because our constant objective throughout the latter half of the '50s, the '60s and the early '70s was to preserve the independence of South Vietnam. That was our basic objective. What we did in order to achieve that objective certainly was influenced by how good or how bad the security situation was in Vietnam. So that's the way I would relate the two points that you were talking about.

LC: This also requires a sort of a fine edge, but it's one, of course, that becomes very important. How crucially did the maintenance of President Diem himself figure at this point in our enhanced commitment to South Vietnam?

JM: Well, Kennedy had decided shortly after he took over that we would continue to support Diem as the legitimate government and as the best government in prospect in South Vietnam. He certainly was the legitimate government. Whether he was the best government in prospect could be argued back and forth. But certainly at that stage, and it wasn't until 1963 when the Buddhist crisis arose that Kennedy certainly began seriously to reconsider the U.S. commitment and support of Diem as the person that we thought should be maintained in power in Vietnam as the best prospect for a successful outcome.

LC: Joe, let me just sort of turn the table just a little bit and ask about the Vietnamese officials with whom you worked, about their reaction to the Taylor mission and then over the course of the fall of 1961 the Kennedy administration decisions. For example, did you have a read on how President Diem reacted to the Taylor mission and the Taylor recommendations, first of all, for "flood relief" quote-unquote?

JM: I think—Laura, I can't swear to this because it's too long ago, but I believe that the Vietnamese probably became aware of the basic recommendation of the Taylor mission for the introduction of a unit, a reasonably small unit of U.S. ground forces into Vietnam. Reading through the official *Foreign Relations*, it seems to me that there were some indications in there, I think probably coming up particularly during Ambassador Nolting's talks with Diem that the Vietnamese, that he and the government, were disappointed that Kennedy did not accept the recommendation for the introduction of

ground forces and changed it to a somewhat lesser commitment on the part of the U.S. There were indications that the Vietnamese at the top level were disappointed by that outcome. Now, I don't recall at this stage getting any feedback of that sort from the Vietnamese I talked to at a lower level than Diem, but I would think that Diem's assessment of Vietnamese opinion that he told Nolting about was probably correct.

LC: During this time—

JM: That's assuming that Taylor's basic recommendation had become general knowledge. I do not recall whether it had or not, Laura. It may not have. That's the reason there may not have been any great reaction one way or the other on the part of the Vietnamese government or the populace below the top level. The top level probably did know what was recommended and therefore were somewhat disappointed at the outcome, but I think they were also pleased with the fact that we did make a major new commitment there.

LC: During this period, the fall of 1961, Joe, can you remember back to your own brief and what were you watching particularly?

JM: Particularly two things, Laura, in that winter of '61-'62. Diem's domestic political position, which was in many ways worsening, particularly as far as the military was concerned, the second thing, the Strategic Hamlet Program which really didn't get started until early '62, as to how it was being carried out and whether it was going to succeed to achieve the purpose for which it was instituted. Those are the two. Plus, I'm sure we were deeply involved in the question of U.S. relationship to the Geneva Accords of 1954 on Vietnam and how we dealt with the International Control Commission in that respect. Clearly, as I read through *U.S. Foreign Relations*, that still remained a significant issue as far as the U.S. was concerned. Since we in the political section handled much of that I'm sure that that also remained a particular concern.

LC: For us, some of these topics have surfaced earlier, but just to focus right now, if you would, Joe, on the Strategic Hamlet Program, can I ask you to talk a little bit about Robert Thompson and his visits to Saigon, which I think began in the summer or fall of 1961? I gather from one source that I've just been looking at, Lawrence Friedman, that Robert Thompson was actually in Saigon for part of the same time for an overlapping visit with the Taylor mission. Can you talk a little bit about his entree to

President Diem and the things that he spoke about as you've been able to determine them?

JM: Yes. I don't recall exactly when Thompson arrived in Vietnam. He was there for a pretty prolonged stay. He arrived with a very high reputation because of the eventually successful British anti-guerilla war in Malaya against the communists. Thompson got a great deal of credit, not only by Britain but I think worldwide for the outcome of that because he had, I think, been a major contributor and probably the principal author of the strategy which contributed that outcome. That strategy, which was to take secure points, defend them well, and gradually spread security over the rest of a country in a guerilla war in order to cope with the guerillas successfully. It was not a strategy which would lead to a rapid outcome. It had to be a very gradual process and certainly required very intensive and successful government organization and efficiency if it was going to achieve its results. I emphasize that because Thompson did succeed in convincing the Vietnamese government to institute a program based on his successful strategy in Malaya. That became known as the Strategic Hamlet Program. President Diem designated his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, as the man responsible for operating that program. Nhu previously had never taken a public executive position within the government. This was the first big strategic program of the government—can you still hear me, Laura?

LC: Yes, absolutely. Yes.

JM: Excuse me?

LC: Yes, Joe, go ahead.

JM: Okay—that he had been placed in charge of. That derived from Thompson's recommendations. Certainly we in the American mission viewed the success of Malaysia, agreed with this approach, felt that it was the appropriate one, but it had to be done with a very large and efficiently operated organization if it was going to achieve its objectives. This is the way in which I felt from my conversations with the Vietnamese from almost the outset that it failed. It ultimately did fail because it proved to be a shambles of a program in the way it was operated. Because of Nhu's pressure to achieve results quickly, it was claimed by province chiefs and others under Nhu's direction in the execution of the program that results were being achieved very fast by moving peasants

in the countryside in to villages or hamlets, surrounding them with barbed wire where they could be protected. Now in central Vietnam this was not as difficult to execute as it was in the Mekong Delta because people tended to live in villages, be concentrated in villages or hamlets, whereas in the Mekong Delta area there was quite a different pattern of living among the Vietnamese. The Mekong Delta, which had many rivers, it had even two major branches of the Mekong and then a tributary to the Mekong there, was also ringed with canals. The peasants there lived stretched out along the waterways, the rivers and the canals. So to force them into villages or hamlets surrounded with barbed wire was a major change in their traditional pattern of living and many resented it. Reading through *Foreign Relations*, I saw that one issue that came up quite frequently was that the peasants felt that they had been promised payment for their labor in helping to create these strategic hamlets, to convert villages and hamlets into strategic hamlets. The Diem government took the position that this was part of the sacrifice they should make and there shouldn't be any payment to them. This was clearly, judging from *Foreign Relations*, a very major issue as far as we were concerned. The people that I talked to in Saigon—at that point nobody from the embassy went out there into the provinces because of the security situation or went out very much anyway. Our military were out there working with the Vietnamese military units, but we absolutely could not use—we in the political section of the embassy could not use the military to try to assess the way the developments were going in the provinces because our military followed the policy of not being involved in politics at all. This was U.S. policy as far as military were concerned. But certainly Vietnamese in Saigon, many of whom had provincial roots and still had contacts with what was going on, I talked with a lot of them. As I say, I pretty soon very much got the view that the Strategic Hamlet Program was really a sham because of the way it was being carried out.

LC: Was the U.S. providing financing for this—

JM: Yes. We were providing extensive financing for all of the materials which went into the strategic hamlet, the barbed wire and all the efforts to improve them socially. So the U.S. was providing extensive financing for that purpose through the AID mission.

LC: Okay. That's what I was going to ask, Joe. Most of that was run through

AID?

JM: Right.

LC: You talked about the difficulties of implementing this and that there were differential difficulties across South Vietnam. Did the program as run by President Nhu make any—or I'm sorry.

JM: It was the brother.

LC: The brother-in-law Nhu.

JM: No, brother.

LC: Brother, brother, that's right. Did that program make allowances for the different patterns of living or was there one program for all of South Vietnam and you had to comply?

JM: No, it didn't. I have to acknowledge it would have been difficult to make allowances. It would have been hard under any circumstances to create strategic hamlets in the Mekong Delta area without creating a lot of resentment on the part of the people simply because they would have to change their very basic pattern of life so much.

LC: Now was Robert Thompson continuing in an advisory capacity as Nhu was directing the program?

JM: Yeah. I don't recall how long Thompson stayed, but I think he was still there when the program was at least being carried out in its initial stages.

LC: You emphasized, Joe, that at least part of the success in the Malayan context was due to the pace at which their version of the Strategic Hamlet Program was implemented. Were there targets in the South Vietnamese program, the provincial chiefs?

JM: Oh, yeah. Nhu established targets providing for rapid establishment of strategic hamlets which had to be met by the province chiefs and their subordinates.

LC: Now you mentioned the resulting resentment against the central government. Did that figure in your own reporting on Diem's worsening political situation domestically?

JM: It probably did. Let me tell you, Laura. I attempted to draw up an official assessment on behalf of the embassy, the U.S. mission, in the Strategic Hamlet Program in the spring of 1962. Because of my pessimistic conclusions it never got out of the U.S.

mission, disagreement by both the military and by our ambassador. So that communication never reached Washington.

LC: Do you have a copy of it, Joe?

JM: No. No. Unlike some people I know, at least political appointees, I did not attempt to keep copies of classified documents.

LC: Can you recall for us whether you had any meeting or—I don't want to say confrontation, but—consultation let's say with the ambassador about your report and whether it was going to go forward?

JM: Well, certainly Fritz Nolting, the ambassador, was acquainted with my views. He probably saw a copy of the draft I had drawn up. The normal process within the mission if we drafted something in the political section, certainly if it impinged on any other part of the U.S. mission like the military or AID, was sent to them for clearance or objection. In this case the military would, of course, have objected because at the top they disagreed. I think there were probably military lower down who would have agreed with it, but that did not get reflected, of course. We know subsequently from the famous John Vann how there were military in the field who disagreed very much with the way the military headquarters in Saigon saw things and with the reflection of that in the official position taken by the Department of Defense and the Secretary of Defense in Washington. I might say at this point, Laura, to me John Vann is the only real hero who emerged from the Vietnam War.

LC: Now, did you think that at the time?

JM: I didn't know John Vann when he was—I'm not even sure he had arrived when I was there. I came to know John Vann very well in the late '60s, but then I did not know him at all.

LC: Oh, okay. In—

JM: We in the political section could not try in any way to sound our own military over the assessment of the political situation in the countryside, and I want to bring in this point, Laura. We in the political section had virtually no contact with the Vietnamese military on the same subject. The reason why was that if the Vietnamese military had contact with us in the political section their careers and lives could have been endangered as the word got back to the government. I'm sure the government was

keeping surveillance. Nhu was keeping surveillance on a number of the leading military who were generally known that their dissatisfaction was increasing would have—their careers would have ended and their lives could have been endangered. Let's straighten this by one point. At some stage, and I think this was—I don't know whether this was in the summer or fall of '61 or early '62. Arthur Gardiner had a big bachelor dinner to which he invited among others General Big Minh. I was at this dinner and whether Arthur told me beforehand that Minh was coming or not, but I saw Minh there. The tables were set up so that there would be four people at each table. Well, I maneuvered so that I sat with General Big Minh because this was a rare opportunity, as you see, to try to sound him out. Now I knew from experience with Vietnamese that direct questions on political matters, not only to the military but in most cases to civilians, would lead the Vietnamese to clam up completely because they were afraid for their own security. However, I had learned that by an indirect Vietnamese manner of talking to these people it was possible to elicit their views in, as I say, in a very elliptical manner, particularly if that Vietnamese had learned about my views on what was happening in Vietnam in the political sphere. In that hothouse atmosphere many Vietnamese knew where individual officials in the American mission stood on these issues. I could judge from Minh's elliptical comments that he was becoming increasingly—what shall I say—a dissenter from the Diem government and that this could indicate that trouble could arise in the future. The next day at the embassy I tried to draft an official—I drafted an official communication to report to Washington my conversation with Minh. It was sent over by the ambassador to MAAG for clearance. General McGarr, who was then in charge of MAAG, said, "Well, Minh has never expressed any such views to me and I don't believe it." So again, my communication to Washington was killed.

LC: Joe, at this point, as a very seasoned Foreign Service officer, I'm sure you could see not only that in the natural course of things that you would be moving out of Saigon, but that it might be an idea for you to move out of Saigon. Did that start to occur to you?

JM: Oh, yeah. Clearly during the last year I was in Saigon, the last of the three, my role within the U.S. mission was considerably diminished from what it had been during most of the first two years under Ambassador Durbrow simply because it was

known by both the ambassador and the deputy chief of mission that I was out of sympathy with the assessment as to whether we should stick with Diem in order to win the war in Vietnam. Now let me add at this point, Laura, what I think is only fair to say. Ambassador Nolting was sent to Vietnam by Kennedy to carry out a policy of complete support of Diem. This was the decision in the spring of 1961. He almost immediately became convinced in his own mind that this was the correct policy.

LC: That it was the correct policy?

JM: Yes, that it was. He agreed with it but not just a hundred percent, a thousand percent. But Nolting was a very fair man. When it came time to prepare my annual efficiency report or evaluation, however you want to term it, the deputy chief of mission wrote the basic report, but Nolting as ambassador wrote the reviewing officer's statement on the report. He called me in. He read to me what he had written. I recall it went like this: "Joe and I completely disagree on the policy approach to the Vietnamese government on the major issues of who we should be supporting there. I disagree with him but he could be right." That could be quite rare, I think, for a senior officer to state right out in the open in the efficiency report. A lot of them could have just left it at, "I think he's wrong, period," but not Nolting. Laura, I will say that that efficiency report, plus the one I got a year later when I was a student at the National War College by the American ambassador who was deputy commandant there, I think those two reports resulted in the fact that I got the fastest promotion of my entire career from Foreign Service officer, Class II to Foreign Service officer, Class I, the very senior class, much faster than I'd gone from any of the lower classes to the next step above in my career. It was because of those two efficiency reports, plus the fact that the promotion board, which makes the recommendations to the secretary of state as to who should be promoted, the promotion boards met during the Buddhist crisis of 1963 when my views with respect to the Diem government became increasingly of those of many people in the United States, including eventually pretty much the top level of the U.S. government. I think that sheer chance that the promotion board was meeting at the time of that crisis led to my being promoted in two years. Had the promotion board met several months later when the subsequent chaotic situation politically developed in Saigon after the overthrow of Diem I certainly would not have had the same chance for promotion. So you can see, Laura,

who one works for and the circumstances under which efficiency reports and promotion panels meet can have a great effect on a career. In other words, as I always said, timing and luck—I think ability counts for a lot, but timing and luck also help one to get ahead very much.

LC: I agree completely. Joe, just to put a final cap on this element, which is an extremely interesting one for anyone looking at Foreign Service career paths and so on, can you just describe what promotion to Class I might then mean for someone in your position?

JM: Well, a promotion to Class I would mean that in the context of work assignments that one would certainly have a position in Washington of director of an office which dealt with several countries abroad or going abroad with the position of deputy chief of mission and a chance to be considered as an ambassador.

LC: Wow.

JM: I might say I'll give you a little more of an idea of the structure in Washington. An office director in Washington, for example, we had the office of Southeast Asian Affairs which normally included Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Malaya and Burma—I think Malaya was in there, too. Yes, because the other was originally that office had included Indonesia and the Philippines, but when those countries got independence it became such a large office it was split in 1955 or '56. The office of Southeast Asian Affairs with the mainland countries, an office of Southwest Pacific Affairs with Indonesia, the Philippines and at that stage Australia and New Zealand were switched from the Bureau of European Affairs to the Bureau of East Asian Affairs and included in that office. Subsequently I'm sure that office also included the small countries in the Pacific, which subsequently acquired independence. The office director was a very significant individual in the geographic bureau structure of the State Department. He reported to the assistant secretary, in this case for East Asian Affairs, who in turn reported to the undersecretary and the secretary of state. So you can see that is a very significant bureaucratic position within the structure of the State Department.

LC: Absolutely. At this point, Joe, let me just for context get you to restate your date of birth. In 1920, is that correct?

JM: That's correct.

LC: So you would have been just in your very early forties at this point.

JM: That's right. I was forty-two when I was promoted to Class II, which was shortly before I left Saigon. I received that promotion. I had thought very much it should have occurred a year earlier, but it didn't. This one, which occurred within two years when I was forty-four, I hadn't expected at all. It was a great surprise to me. As a matter of fact, I hadn't even looked at the promotion list. Somebody telephoned me to tell me that I was on the promotion list. I was so surprised.

LC: Well, it is certainly a tribute to Ambassador Nolting.

JM: It is. That's the reason I've always had a high regard for Nolting. There was one subsequent experience in which I shall describe in more detail later. It was when I went out to Vietnam. I was then stationed in Washington and went out to Vietnam in September of '63 as the State Department representative on a two-man mission decided upon by President Kennedy to assess the situation in Vietnam. The Defense Department representative was Marine Maj. Gen. Victor Krulak. When we came back to Washington and reported to the president and his National Security Council staff, Nolting, who by that time was no long ambassador in Vietnam, but was in Washington, was at that meeting. He tried to discredit my report. This was the time of a very chaotic situation resulting from the Buddhist crisis in Vietnam.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: Actually, Diem and Nhu were mounting what amounted to a reign of terror against the Vietnamese officials and military that didn't agree with it, and even against American officials. I came back with a very dire report on the political situation in Vietnam. Nolting tried to discredit this by saying that, "After all, you have been anti-Diem for quite a long time." Immediately two people jumped to my defense, Averell Harriman and McGeorge Bundy, interestingly enough at this meeting. As a result of that encounter I rarely saw Nolting again. When we did the relations between us were rather cool. So there you have my relations with Nolting. I still have a very high regard for him as an individual.

LC: It's a fascinating glimpse into the sort of personal dynamics that affect policy decisions. I'm glad you shared it with us. Let's take a break for today there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [20] of [57]
Date: June 17, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is June seventeenth, 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech and the ambassador is on the telephone speaking to me from Nevada. Good morning again, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, I want to begin if I could just by recapping a couple of, again, timeline questions that came up at the end of your tour in Saigon. In December of 1961 as you know, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was publicly declared effectively by the communist side, although we know there were a number of non-communist at that time front organizations that also seemed to be under the NLF (National Liberation Front) umbrella. Do you remember taking note of the formation of the NLF?

JM: Yes, Laura. Usually there was a time lag in this. Our information was based on the monitoring of the broadcasting services in North Vietnam by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service of the U.S. government. Those transcripts usually arrived with some delay. We learned, for example, about the significant decision in May 1959 by the Communist Party of North Vietnam to begin to push for, the way they put it, for the reunification of Vietnam. In other words, this to me amounted to their declaration of war against the government of South Vietnam. The second significant one was, as I recall, in December of ’60 when I think what was the People’s Revolutionary Party was established in South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese communists as a communist party to be in at least the next step that you just mentioned, the formation of the National Liberation Front, which was kind of the sham organization often used by the communists in other countries. They set it up in South Vietnam with the People’s Revolutionary Party, the Communist Party to be in the vanguard of this so-called Liberation Front with certain other sham, purportedly non-communist organizations as a part of it. Then eventually, of course, this led to the establishment by the North Vietnamese communists of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the PRG, in South Vietnam, which to, I think to our eternal shame we permitted to participate as a fully equal member with the

legitimate South Vietnamese government in the negotiations that began in Paris under the administration of Lyndon Johnson in 1968. These steps were progressively taken by the North Vietnamese and subsequently publicized by their radio broadcasts so that we were able to follow them with some lag.

LC: Did you attach particular importance to these announcements?

JM: Yes, because as I say, each was subject to an interpretation as a step up in the war being first undertaken and then pursued by the North Vietnamese communists against the government and against the independence of South Vietnam.

LC: Joe, just a couple of weeks, actually about seven or eight weeks after the declaration of the NLF there was, you may remember, a very brief air attack on the palace. This was in February of 1962.

JM: Yes. Yes.

LC: Joe, can you tell me anything about that, either the attack or what you remember?

JM: Yes. Certainly from the standpoint of our family I can tell you I was shaving in my bathroom when I could see planes—I guess there were two planes involved, zooming in over Independence Palace, the presidential palace in Saigon, obviously dropping something because smoke was beginning to rise. We realized that something was underway. Nobody knew how extensive it was going to be at that point. My wife and I were personally very concerned because two of our children had already left the house by school bus to go out one of the main streets of Saigon, a very crowded one, to the American school, which was right next to the airport. We were very concerned as to whether there might be strafing along that highway if the bus hadn't gotten to school or once they got there if this was going to be a major coup attempt as to whether bombs were going to be dropped on the airport, which could also strike the school. We did find out about a half-hour later that the bus had arrived at school. I think the teachers had all the kids down under their desks. We had some serious personal concern for a while but pretty soon it became evident that this was simply an isolated attempt by a couple of pilots to bomb the palace, which in its longer term effects, I think, had no real significance at all as far as the events in Vietnam were concerned except to indicate that there was growing dissidence within the military forces against the government of

President Diem.

LC: Did President Diem, do you remember, see any political utility in this very small attack?

JM: No. I don't think—the coup attempt, the first coup attempt in November of '60, which had occurred—let's see, that would've been more than a year earlier—hadn't resulted in any change in the approach to governance of Diem and Nhu. This one certainly didn't have any effect either.

LC: Did it have any affect in the other direction in terms of actually restricting any more heavy boots on non-communist opposition by the government?

JM: For a while I think it did because I think it increased the distrust of Diem and Nhu of their own military and therefore in that sense represented a further burden on effective military operations against the communists.

LC: I have one other question about this period, Joe, and that has to do with the increasing use of American pilots in training for the VNAF (Vietnamese Air Force) flyers, some of whom clearly were disaffected, as we know from the events of February, but I wonder if you were paying much attention to the fact that the United States was starting to move U.S. military personnel although formerly in training capacities into what were, in effect, combat operations.

JM: Oh, yeah. Well, that became certainly in increasing evidence during the first half of '62, the remainder of my tour there, because this was an outgrowth of General Taylor's mission to Vietnam in October of 1961. President Kennedy did reject the recommendation of General Taylor that we send troops into Vietnam, albeit a very small force. Instead of sending troops he decided to increase the number of American "advisors," and I'd put advisors in quotes, from about one thousand to about seventeen thousand with an increasingly direct participation in the conflict, particularly by air personnel. An attempt was made by the Kennedy administration to maintain a cover of secrecy over the extent of these operations, but they did fairly steadily expand from then on.

LC: Was there any American press interest that you remember in the fact that these advisors were actually becoming involved in operations?

JM: Oh, yes. Certainly yes there was increasing interest because within Vietnam

it was impossible to keep a total cover over the increasing extent of participation by American air personnel in combat operations.

LC: Who in the embassy would have had responsibility for dealing with U.S. press inquiries?

JM: Well, the press would seek out anybody who they thought would talk to them both about this and about the increasing non-communist opposition to the Diem government. I'll give you a good—I had lots of press people who would come in and talk to me. I usually received them and, I think, invariably received them as we were expected to do, but would maintain the official line in any talks with them. I'll give you an example of this. One of the principal press correspondents resident in Vietnam at that point was Homer Bigart. I think he had been a correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* which went out of existence, I think, sometime in the '60s or the '70s but by that time I think he was a correspondent for the *New York Times*. He was a very astute correspondent, but he came into my office and assumed the guise of somebody who was very dumb who wanted to be enlightened from the ground up on everything. I realized immediately what his ploy was. I was very much on my guard as to what I said to him, but it was fascinating the way he was trying to worm information and statements out of me that I did not want to make in a conversation with a correspondent.

LC: Do you think even someone like him who clearly was pretty perspicacious, had a good sense of what was happening, do you think he sensed that you were one of the people in the embassy who was a little unhappy with the Diem regime?

JM: Oh, I'm sure that he probably knew that because in that hothouse atmosphere in Saigon word would get around pretty quickly. Certainly it had gotten around among the Vietnamese so I'm sure it had gotten around among the correspondents. As confirmation of that after—excuse me, Laura—after I got back to Washington in the summer of '62, in November of that year David Halberstam, who had also been an important *New York Times* correspondent in Vietnam, invited me over to the National Press Club for dinner and engaged in very extensive discussion with me about the situation in Vietnam on background, not for attribution purposes completely. Since I was no longer in Vietnam I did talk to him quite frankly for background purposes. He knew precisely what my position was with respect to the Diem government.

LC: Well, Joe, let me ask you about the preparations that you made for ending your tour. We talked a little bit about your knowledge that certainly your current posting was going to come to an end one way or the other because of the length of time you'd served there and also the changing situation. Did you make the rounds of the other diplomats in town as you were leaving?

JM: Yes. I made farewell calls on quite a number of people. I know you mentioned the *U.S. Foreign Relations*, the official public record of what went on in Vietnam. That document has reproduced two of the memoranda of conversations I had, one with the Chinese ambassador and a second with Vice President Tho, in which both talked extremely frankly about their assessment of what was going on in Vietnam and wanted mine. I also remember making a farewell call on the Japanese ambassador who also would talk to me at great length and ask me many questions about my assessment of the situation in Vietnam. Incidentally, I had not been particularly close to him, but I had this very extensive farewell conversation with him. This was in the early summer of '62. About nine years later in 1971 when I was a Foreign Service inspector inspecting the U.S. mission to the UN agencies in Geneva, somehow he became aware I was there. On the basis of this farewell conversation I had with him he invited me to a splendid luncheon. I think my wife was with me and we had a very fine time with him, an interesting postscript to that farewell talk with him.

LC: Absolutely. The Japanese were what would you say, concerned or interested at a distance about the events?

JM: Well, since this was in East Asia the Japanese were very interested. They were not playing any role of any consequence, certainly none militarily and none really politically, but they were very interested in following it because of the possible eventual impact on Japan's security.

LC: Sure. Do you remember anything in addition to the MEMCOM that appears in the *FRUS* volume about your talks with the ambassador from the Nationalist Chinese government?

JM: Well, Laura, as a matter of fact as I think I've told you I've read through much of that volume of U.S. relations with Vietnam a few weeks ago. I hadn't even remembered that those two memoranda were in there, the conversation with him and the

one with the conversation with Vice President Tho. They were quite revealing to me. There was much in there that I had not recalled at all so I don't recall anything else, no.

LC: Okay, very interesting. Now, Joe, as you were making these rounds and preparing to leave did you already have in hand what your assignment would be?

JM: Laura, just before we leave this other question of farewell, I don't think I mentioned, maybe I did the last time we had an interview, the farewell dinner given for me by ambassador Nolting and he'd asked me to provide the guest list. I had a lot of Vietnamese friends there. Did I mention that to you?

LC: No. Go ahead and tell about that, very interesting.

JM: Let's see. I had quite a number of our, my wife and I, best Vietnamese friends for this farewell dinner. Ambassador Nolting made a toast at the end of the dinner to me for departure. I got up and replied and I think made a very emotional statement about what was going on in Vietnam, the threat to the existence of South Vietnam and my hope and desire that the U.S. would remain there and help them counter this threat to their continued existence. To me, that was a very emotional occasion and I think it also increased my closeness to quite a number of these Vietnamese. I'll give you another example that one of the Vietnamese there was Pham Dang Lam and his wife. He was the number two in the foreign office. Actually, he became the foreign minister after the successful coup in October or November of 2003—excuse me, 1963.

LC: Sure.

JM: I saw him when I was back in Vietnam on a visit in February of '65. Then I hadn't had much contact with him until I was named ambassador to Madagascar and was asked to pass through Paris to talk with the embassy there and with some French officials since Madagascar had been under French colonial control until independence in 1960. During that period I was in Paris, Pham Dang Lam was then the ambassador. He invited my wife and me to lunch at his house, just the four of us. We had a very fine occasion. So some of these old friendships remained for a long time, or contact in the case of the Japanese ambassador, friendship in the case of Pham Dang Lam.

LC: That's very interesting.

JM: Some of these carried on for a very long time.

LC: Joe, can I ask you a little more about your dinner speech or your toast reply

that you made that evening? About how many people from—how many Vietnamese people were there and how did Nonie feel that night? Can you tell me anything about that?

JM: Well, I would say there were probably six or eight Vietnamese couples. I don't think there were more than probably between sixteen and twenty all told at the dinner. So I think there must have been six, something like half-a-dozen maybe, eight Vietnamese couples. Nonie felt just as strongly as I did about our attachment to what I will call U.S. policy in Vietnam at that stage and to our feelings for a lot of the Vietnamese people we knew so well.

LC: Can you tell me about actually leaving Saigon? How did you manage to and how did Nonie manage to pack up the house and get the children in line and all the rest of it?

JM: Laura, we'd been through this so often I don't think packing up was any great problem. The biggest problem was that for the last month or month-and-a-half we were invited out for dinner every night. So that plus trying to carry on my work in the office and making farewell calls left us pretty totally exhausted by the time we left. Quite a number of Vietnamese friends had dinners for us, including a couple I remember in the principle restaurant over in Cholon, the principle Chinese restaurant there. Interestingly, Laura, I'll just mention this point. Until 1961 there were no Vietnamese restaurants in Saigon. The first one opened in the fall of '61. I remember we were invited by a Vietnamese couple to have dinner with them there.

LC: Is that right?

JM: It was called The Three Crabs. The Vietnamese, they did eat shall I call it public food a lot, but the way they would do it, there were itinerant soup kitchens which were pushed around the streets of Vietnam by these street vendors. The Vietnamese, even the vice president of Vietnam would do this. They would go out and get their meals from the itinerant street vendors, mainly a kind of Vietnamese soup called *pho*. That's how they would eat publicly. They would take it into their houses what they got from the street vendors and eat it. So almost all restaurants until '61 were either Chinese or French in Saigon.

LC: I had no idea. That's really very interesting.

JM: You know, I'll mention another thing.

LC: Sure.

JM: In 1957, the first trip I had made to Southeast Asia for a SEATO meeting in Bangkok, the Thai government invited all the delegates to this SEATO meeting to a huge luncheon, not in a Thai restaurant but in the chief Chinese restaurant in Saigon. I think probably there were virtually no Thai restaurants of any consequence then, which is a great contrast of what we have in the States here now where Thai restaurants are all over the place. Some are excellent.

LC: There's one about six blocks from here in Lubbock, Texas, if you can believe it or not.

JM: I'm sure. Vietnamese restaurants have become very popular in the States. That's certainly a fascinating cultural change that I can be certain of with respect to Vietnam, and I suspect in Thailand as well.

LC: That's really interesting. Now, were you an aficionado of the street food, the street vendors? Did you go out and—

JM: No. We did not do that.

LC: Okay. The name of the Vietnamese restaurant—

JM: Although I think our kids did it occasionally.

LC: Probably.

JM: I know that they did subsequently in Laos where there were some Lao restaurants when we were there a number of years later. They would go out with their Lao friends to these restaurants with the open sewage pouring down in gutters in front of the restaurant.

LC: Oh, dear. Yeah, kids are great because they don't have any fear. Let me ask, then, did you have in-hand your next assignment?

JM: Yes. Let me tell you how that developed, Laura.

LC: Yes, please. Yes.

JM: I had indicated that after my tour in Saigon I had hoped for senior training for a year which appeared to me to be the best step career-wise after my service in Saigon. So I had indicated that to Washington. I got word about March that I was to be assigned to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. I was frankly quite

disappointed with that for two reasons. One, I wanted to go to the National War College in Washington, which was the inter-service college not only for military but also for Foreign Service personnel. Because it was definitely the more prestigious of these war colleges. It was, as I say, the inter-service one. Each of the services, the Navy, the Army, and the Air had their own. So I was quite, as I say, disappointed for that reason also because we had a house in the Washington area which we'd had rented while we were in Saigon. I was very anxious to move back into that house after three years if we were going to be in the States rather than having to rent a place in Newport, Rhode Island. Fortunately, within a relatively short period of time I got word from Washington that my assignment was being changed from the Naval War College to the National War College, which of course pleased me immensely. I learned later how it came about. I hadn't taken any action. I don't think anybody in Saigon had tried to get this changed, but I learned that one of the senior Foreign Service officers in personnel in the State Department, when he saw that I was on the Naval War College list said, "Well, Mendenhall has been performing as political counselor in this extremely growingly important assignment in Saigon. He ought to be going to the National War College." He effected the change and he told me about it much later. I knew him slightly. I didn't know him extremely well, but I was very pleased that he had made that change.

LC: Who was that?

JM: I knew what my next assignment was going to be and it's a course of, oh, about ten months so I knew that it would occupy the bulk of the next year.

LC: Can you say who actually intervened on your behalf there? Who was that gentleman?

JM: Let me see whether I can remember his name now. It won't come to me, Laura, at the moment.

LC: As an auxiliary question, were the FSOs (Foreign Service officers) who were in the personnel section generally, did they tend to stay in that section and become specialists essentially?

JM: No. That was just a Washington assignment.

LC: Oh, okay. Okay.

JM: Some were in what I'll call the administrative cone of the Foreign Service so

that they served in administrative positions abroad and then back in Washington in administrative positions in the various bureaus and some of them in personnel. But some of them were substantive people also assigned, usually for a couple of years to personnel. I know a number of non-administrative officers who had a period of duty in personnel and this was certainly one of them. He was basically a substantive officer.

LC: Joe, can you just talk for a minute about how important the process of establishing the career path for Foreign Service officers is? In some sense it's kind of a free-for-all. It's all very fluid and decisions get made and people sent to different postings. Can you talk a little bit about how this—

JM: I'll be glad to talk about it in general, Laura.

LC: Sure. Yes. Absolutely.

JM: What I say is probably no longer applicable today, but I can tell you how it worked during my era. As a younger junior officer, one scarcely ever questioned an assignment. Younger officers were not expected to. They were expected to go where they were assigned. The first time I had ever questioned an assignment was, as I think I've told you earlier, when I was suddenly thrust on the State Department for physical reasons in the summer of '55. I had been slated to go to Indonesia and my physical examination led to the fact that I was going to be assigned to Washington because of the lack of modern medical facilities in Indonesia at that point. Then since even then the State Department tried to work out assignments and positions long in advance, the department thrust me into the only position that was open at that point in the economic and social office of the Bureau of International Organization Affairs. I realized I didn't want that at all because I didn't think it was—at first I wasn't particularly interested in that area in the international field, and second because I didn't think it would represent a good step career-wise. The first day on duty I went to see the head of that office and told him that I didn't really want it. He replied, "Well, if you don't want it then I don't want you." So that was really the first time I did question it. As one becomes more senior one does have a better opportunity to try to work out future assignments. The department then also tried to work them out in a progressive fashion which would advance both the interest of the Department and the career interests of the individual officer.

LC: It's just a fascinating project to actually think about and plan the next

posting, the advancement paths of all of these different people with different skills.

JM: What the department did at that time, and I suspect they still do, is on a form filled out once a year would indicate, on that form he would indicate what he was looking for with respect to his next assignment—he wouldn't necessarily get it—and his eventual career aims. So the department did have this piece of paper to consider in making the assignment. Not that one always got what he wanted by any means.

LC: No. No. Well, Joe, the National War College course as you've said was essentially one academic year. It began—am I right in thinking—

JM: It began in August and ended in 2002 for me—and ended in June of 2000—why do I keep—

LC: I don't know.

JM: August of 1963.

LC: Anyone listening will know.

JM: Ended in June of 1963

LC: '62 to '63, right.

JM: Right. I don't know why I keep—

LC: That's all right. Anyone listening will no doubt know exactly what you're talking about. If not they can always refer to our bio sketch of you.

JM: Before we get to the National War College we might deal briefly with the one substantive thing that emerged from my consultation period immediately after I returned to Washington. I reported, of course, for consultation to the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. Averell Harriman had become the assistant secretary. His deputy was Ed Rice who had been consul general in Hong Kong before he became the deputy to Harriman. I might mention that the position of consul general in Hong Kong was the most important in the whole service as far as consul general positions were concerned because, in effect, that was our embassy trying to follow events in China. So it was by far exceeded in importance any other consulate general. I mention this because that indicates that Rice had occupied a very important position before he became the deputy assistant secretary to Harriman. Rice said that Harriman wanted from me a memorandum with my views, my frank assessment of the situation in Vietnam and my views as to who might succeed Diem if he were no longer to be the president. That is the memorandum

that I developed and submitted to Rice for Harriman. That memorandum is reproduced in the official *Foreign Relations* volume, as you know.

LC: Yes. I have it in front of me, in fact. Let me just pull out a few points and ask you to say a little something about this. You certainly have made clear that the request for this report came from Harriman. Do you know if there was any further higher up impetus for getting an assessment from you of the situation in 1962?

JM: Not that I'm aware of, Laura. Harriman, as the assistant secretary, because of his background and influence, his political background and his long service to the U.S. government in many positions, was not the customary assistant secretary. He occupied a very special elevated position in the hierarchy, virtually equal to the secretary of state, I would say. He could talk directly to anybody in government, including the president I think, which most assistant secretaries would not be able to do.

LC: Right. Certainly the president probably took his calls. I would guess that's correct. Joe, the memo begins with a very short but very powerful statement about the increased strength of the Viet Cong over the period of your residence in Saigon from 1959 to 1962. It's certainly an important point because the rest of the memo deals with the internal issues of Diem's survivability.

JM: The two of these issues, to me, have always been intertwined.

LC: Yeah. They clearly are. To sort of unwrap that a little bit I wanted to ask whether you thought, given the growing strength and effectiveness of the VC (Viet Cong) and their political wings, particularly out in the rural areas, do you think that by the time you left in 1962 that any change on the South Vietnamese government side of the equation would have made the situation salvageable? In other words, was there really anything that could have, in terms of adjusting the South Vietnamese government, its activities, its programs that could have, in 1962 at least, put the VC in a box and contained their obviously growing effectiveness?

JM: Laura, judging that question with the benefit of hindsight, which so many people do even today, of course, in the case of the Iraq war, I would say that probably nothing would have changed the eventual course of events within South Vietnam, either as far as the government was concerned or as far as the VC were concerned. I think the war would have steadily expanded. I think that there probably would have been at least a

certain amount of turmoil within the non-communist elements in South Vietnam as they turned out to be after Diem was overthrown by the coup, simply because there wasn't anybody strong enough to impose themselves, strong enough or effective enough to impose themselves completely. Now the turmoil might have been somewhat less because the Buddhist situation had not developed at all by then. That emerged in the summer of '63 and I think that contributed to a lot of the domestic political turmoil within South Vietnam after the overthrow of Diem. So in that sense there might have been somewhat less turmoil. My overall assessment, Laura, is that the political turmoil that did ensue for two years or so after the overthrow of Diem certainly raises serious questions about my judgment as to whether Diem should have been replaced or not or whether he should have continued to govern Vietnam. I think in the end, the emergence of Thieu as the president of Vietnam served their purposes better with respect to the course of the war than if Diem had continued. Thieu certainly permitted more American good influences with respect to the conduct of the war in Vietnam over a number of years than Diem and Nhu would have permitted.

LC: Meaning not just the military investments by the United States, but also the development side of the issue. Is that fair?

JM: That, but I'm thinking particularly on the security side, Laura. For example, I am convinced as Bill Colby has written—Colby, who eventually became director of the CIA—has written in his books and I think a number of other people have agreed that by 1970 or '71 we had won, "we" meaning we and the South Vietnamese had won the guerilla war in South Vietnam. We won it because we finally devised together with the South Vietnamese an effective counter-guerilla organization starting about 1967. By three or four years later that effective organization, which we had great trouble in devising, because we had tried many methods before, many approaches which had not been successful, that close collaboration between Americans and South Vietnamese which produced that very favorable result of winning the guerilla war would not have occurred under Diem or Nhu because they would have never permitted that kind of U.S. association with the South Vietnamese. In many ways we were running things in order to get the maximum kind of efficiency, but we were using primarily South Vietnamese in order to do it. So I think that if one answers your question by looking over the

subsequent ten to twelve or thirteen years, that what eventually occurred, I think, has validated the view that Diem should have been replaced. It took a long time and a terrific amount of disillusionment and turmoil to reach that stage between ’63 and ’65, but I think eventually the point of view is valid. I know there’s still a number of people who would disagree with that, including my old friend Bill Colby, were he still alive.

LC: It’s interesting because it’s almost an unintended consequence of the elimination of Diem. Is that fair? That with a new leader who permitted this closer on the ground cooperation against the guerilla movement, that that is actually the piece that Diem was stopping, that was the informative and as you’re pointing out the most important key element. That really wasn’t seen—was it—as the principal problem with Diem in 1963?

JM: No, Laura. You know, all this talk about post-war planning in Iraq or in Vietnam, to me is for the birds. What’s going to happen after a war? The situation that’s going to develop cannot be foreseen and how you’re going to deal with it has to be devised as events develop. Sure you try to do as much advance planning as you can, but what happens is in many cases not what one has foreseen at all. To me this happens with respect to any war. What happens after that war, if you look back at other ones, what happens? Nobody is really foreseeing that. You have to deal with the problems as they arise. Sometimes you arrive at a successful solution, partly by chance, partly because you’ve finally reached on the right approach to it. I don’t see that all this idea of forward planning—the Defense Department engages across the board in contingency planning, which they should in a military sense. But as the military people say, the moment war starts all these plans go out the window.

LC: Because, of course, the situation has already begun to change, even before the ink is dry in some ways.

JM: That’s right.

LC: Turning again to the memo that you I’m sure recall writing and submitting, can you tell me how you—did you struggle with this line, “Recommendation: Get rid of Diem, Mr. and Mrs. Nhu and the rest of the Ngo family.” Did you struggle to decide whether you should actually write that or not?

JM: No, because I had already reached that conclusion by the time I had left

Vietnam. To recap, I was quite pro-Diem when I arrived in Vietnam in 1959. I thought he had done a very effective job during the first five years, particularly during the first three years of his administration, somewhat less so from ’57 to ’59, but I was still quite pro-Diem. But I began to change toward the end of 1960 when I saw that the first coup attempt against him had produced no change in the political approach of himself and Nhu, produced no change whatsoever. I began to feel that Nhu had to go. That was because of the increasing anti-Nhu sentiment that was developing among the non-communists. Then eventually as time went on, particularly as a result of many negotiations with the Diem government over the counter-insurgency plan and the fact that they made no political change in their political approach as a result of the coup attempt in November of ’60, I would say by the time Nolting arrived in May of ’61 I thought it was hopeless to try to bring about any real change in Diem and Nhu. He would never get rid of Nhu. I concluded in my mind that their approach to governing South Vietnam was so inefficient, so ineffective that we were not going to win the war if South Vietnam continued along that line. So I had no hesitation about putting that conclusion down on paper in the summer of ’62.

LC: It certainly is startling to anyone who reads the press releases from the State Department or even someone reading through *FRUS* because of just the baldness of the statement that we need to get rid of him. It also kind of knocks against some of what we the American public have heard lately about the internal debates in the war against terrorism that intelligence analysts and threat assessors in the CIA and so forth and the State Department, apparently, have felt that they’ve been shut down, not able to express minority viewpoints, challenges to the policy and so on. So in some ways it’s extremely refreshing to know that you felt you could be not only verbal about it with superiors, but also to commit it to paper in a memo that you knew that Averell Harriman, for example, is going to read.

JM: Well, Laura, I will say as a sort of preview of things to come, that my unvarnished statement of my views then and later probably adversely affected my own career in some respects later because I did, with these very strong views that I held, did alienate such strong figures such as Secretary of Defense McNamara and Maxwell Taylor who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs and then ambassador in Vietnam. I know the way

things developed that this didn't help me. Also the fact that a couple of years of turmoil in South Vietnam after the overthrow of Diem certainly raised real questions as to my views so that in some sense I was hurt by these strong views.

LC: I think probably also though, Joe, don't you think you found allies or allies found you as time went on?

JM: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

LC: Can you just throw out a couple of names of people that you think probably lined up with you as time went on?

JM: Well, I'll say one thing. I think Harriman's views on the Diem government and mine were identical. I don't know whether he'd reached that conclusion then. I think he had reached it but for different reasons, reasons which I seriously questioned because Diem opposed the Harriman policy with respect to the so-called neutralization of Laos. I think that was the thing that soured Harriman on Diem, whereas I think Diem was right on that score. The conclusion by Harriman and myself was that—so I knew he was on my side and then this also previews something that will come up in the future. When I made that trip to Vietnam with General Krulak as presidential representatives in September of '63 and came back to report to the president and Ambassador Nolting tried to undermine my credibility, McGeorge Bundy was one who sprang up to my defense then. I guess I had some allies along the way also. Rusk played the Buddha. He was always noncommittal in these meetings.

LC: I think that also led to a decline in his influence. This is just my opinion. I don't think he was—most scholars agree he wasn't a central figure in the Vietnam issue.

JM: Certainly not during the earlier years, but I think by '68 he was more influential than a number of others but that was much later.

LC: Well, Joe, let's take a break there for today.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [21] of [57]
Date: June 29, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-ninth of June 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. Joe is speaking to me by telephone from Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: If you would, Joe, let's pick up where we left off, which was the beginning of your time at the National War College. You had described in some detail earlier why it was preferable for you personally and professionally to attend there.

JM: Yes.

LC: I wonder if you could describe what you found when you arrived in terms of the curriculum, for example.

JM: First, I may have said the last time, but if so I'll repeat. The course at the National War College lasted about ten months from August 1962 to June of 1963. The War College has about a—I should say had. I have no idea what the system is today, but it had at that time about 140 students each year, about a quarter from the Army, a quarter from the Navy, including the Marine Corps, a quarter from the Air Force, and a quarter civilians, most of whom were from the State Department with very small representation from Treasury, CIA, and AID and a few other agencies. The institution was headed by a lieutenant general as the commandant and had an Army deputy, a Navy deputy, I think an Air Force deputy, and a State Department deputy who was almost, I think, invariably an ambassador, either completing his career or between assignments as ambassadors. The State Department deputy commandant when I was there was Winthrop Brown who had already served as our ambassador to Laos. Subsequent to his, I think, two-year tour at the War College as the deputy commandant became a deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian affairs and then later ambassador to South Korea, a gentleman I came to know quite well, as a matter of fact, and admired. I'll give some description of what we did because the schedule for each day was pretty consistent. There was some change as the year passed, but each day started out at nine o'clock with a scheduled lecturer who would

talk for about an hour. To give some indication of the types of lectures that we had, among others we had Dean Acheson, the ex-secretary of state. We had Willy Brandt who was I think then mayor of Berlin and later became the chancellor of Germany. We had George Meany, the president of the AFL-CIO. We had Walt Rostow who was by that time the head of the policy planning staff in the State Department. I'll pause for a moment to indicate one interchange I had with Rostow during the time he was there. Each talk was followed by about a half-hour of questioning from the students. I raised the question with Rostow, "Since we're not getting any support from Europe in the Vietnam conflict," which we were already pretty heavily involved in, "why don't we just reduce if not eliminate our support for NATO?" He gave what I thought was a very effective answer. He said, "Twice the United States in the twentieth century has had to come to rescue Europe from itself. We think we ought to be there in order to prevent this from happening again." I thought that was a pretty realistic answer. It certainly convinced me that we should stay around for that purpose. The Europeans, of course, like to think of themselves as in many ways superior to the U.S., but when you get right down to it his answer is correct. We did rescue them twice and certainly what we did in the post-World War II world was to rescue them also from the Soviet Union during the Cold War. So actually three times we rescued them in the twentieth century. So I guess it's a pretty good idea if we continue to keep an oar in there. Then after about 10:30 the student body was broken down into several groups under the leadership of a member of the permanent faculty staff at the War College to discuss the talk of the day and deal with it inside out if possible. Then that was usually followed, if the weather was good, by physical exercise outside. Some played golf, some played volleyball or various activities. Then the afternoon session varied considerably. During most of the year the student body was broken down into various committees, the main purpose of which—and each committee took up a foreign policy problem to develop a so-called U.S. government position on this particular problem. I think the main purpose of these afternoon sessions, and I think it was a very good idea, was to foster interagency cooperation between, well, among the various military departments as well as between the military departments and the civilian agencies including the State Department. I personally had already had considerable experience in that connection because of my Vietnam experience, but I

thought it was a very useful idea for most of the students, both military and civilian, who had not had that kind of experience. Another activity that was engaged in in the afternoon was work on the research paper which each student was expected to prepare, a sort of major thesis paper. We had to devolve considerable time to doing research and writing that paper and then presenting the paper and the defense of it to the entire student body. All 140 students had to do that during the course of the year. The subject that I chose—a number chose, I might say, the important issue of whether the split between the Soviet Union and the Communist China was real and if so what it meant for us. That was a very popular topic. I knew it would be so I chose a somewhat more abstruse one, which was whether the U.S. should furnish food to China. That may sound of little significance, but at that time it was of considerable because the famine in China resulting from the Great Leap Forward, I don't think we knew by any means the full extent of it, but we knew that China was quite short of food. I took the position that under no circumstances, in view of the very fundamental enmity of Mao Zedong toward us, should we furnish food under any circumstances, whether as a gift, as a loan, or as a sale to China because I thought it would simply serve to strengthen the regime. I was influenced particularly by what had happened in Russia shortly after the communists took over in 1917 and 1918 when they also were faced with a famine in the early '20s. The famous Hoover mission, relief mission to Russia, furnished very substantial food aid to the Russians at that time in order to relieve the emergency situation. It certainly did not help us politically. On the contrary, I think it served to strengthen the communist regime there, which as we all know grew substantially stronger as the years went on and was our enemy for so many years. I felt that historical precedent was one which we should pay attention to when deciding whether to do anything for China. As a matter of fact, I don't think we ever did furnish any food to China.

LC: I think that's correct.

JM: Actually, as we look around now, that very problem arises again with respect to North Korea. As you know, it's been in the news the past few days. The United States has decided to furnish fifty thousand tons of foodstuffs to North Korea despite the enmity between our country and theirs and the very difficult problem of their nuclear aspirations.

LC: Joe, is there anything to be said for the position which certainly some would

take that you have to have leverage in order to use leverage and that by giving—

JM: An argument can be made, particularly in the case of North Korea. I don't think in the case of China at that time that the issue really arose because we weren't attempting to engage in any negotiations with China at that point. I think as you just suggest the North Korea case may be distinguishable from that. Although in view of the history of North Korea of absorbing all compromises by our side, our side being the non-communist side, and swallowing them and not making any real compromises on their side, I don't think says a great deal in support of the leverage idea. I still think this is very debatable. I'm not sure that I would offer food aid, particularly because we can't be sure whether the food goes to assist the armed forces or whether it really reaches the hungry people.

LC: Yes. That's absolutely right. In the case of China that you were studying while at the National War College, I wonder if you had reference—you spoke about the reference to the Hoover mission, which is I think a very instructive case. Did you also have a chance to look back over the previous decade of British interactions with China, which, of course, were influenced by the Hong Kong angle and so on? They had contested some American restrictions on the CoCom (Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls) list of materials to be banned from shipment and transshipment and so on. Did the British case arise for you?

JM: I don't recall specifically looking at the British aspect of this, Laura. It may have come up in my research work, but I don't recall that it did very much.

LC: Did you have access to any materials that weren't in the public domain when you were doing the research, Joe?

JM: No. I think we were limited at the War College to what was in the public domain. We did not go to various departments to look at classified articles and classified material.

LC: Okay. So no CIA assessments of the impact of the Great Leap Forward?

JM: No.

LC: Do you remember some of the materials that you did use? Were there magazine articles and U.S. press?

JM: I can't remember specifically what they were, but there was quite a lot of

discussion in the public domain of this issue by that stage. We had very extensive bibliography or reference lists. I consulted a lot of them in various publications.

LC: How strong was the resource base at the National War College? Were they putting money into the library?

JM: They had quite a good library, as a matter of fact, both historically and of current material. I suspect the emphasis was even more on the latter. I wouldn't assert that flatly, but I suspect that was the case.

LC: How did you paper presentation go down? How was it received?

JM: I think it went down all right. There certainly wasn't nearly as much interest in my subject as in the Soviet-Chinese communist split. That of course was the thing that was making all the headlines. It was the main focus of interest with respect to China at that stage.

LC: Now, why did you come to select the topic that you did? You said that you didn't want to do the Sino-Soviet split because, of course, everyone else was. I can understand that completely. Did you have this continuing interest in the China situation as a result of your Vietnam experience?

JM: Exactly. Exactly.

LC: Can you comment a little bit about the connection that you saw?

JM: Well, it was clear that the North Vietnamese communists enjoyed the support of both the Soviet Union and Communist China despite the growing split between those two powers. They certainly both continued to assist the North Vietnamese campaign to take over South Vietnam. Their opposition to us during the Vietnam War was consistent, very consistent throughout, I would say. After all a lot of the Soviet aid, although some was delivered by Soviet ships a lot of it passed through China and arrived in North Vietnam by rail. Therefore the Chinese, despite the growing conflict between the two countries over their policies toward each other, certainly not only tolerated but certainly permitted the Soviets to use their facilities to extend assistance to North Vietnam.

LC: Joe, you mentioned that you had a blossoming relationship in some way with Ambassador Brown. Did you know him before you came to the National War College? I'm not sure if we discussed that before.

JM: I'm not sure whether I had met him or not. I knew of him very well because when he was ambassador to Laos from I think 1959 to '61 or '62, many of the cables that he sent into Washington on the growing crisis in Laos, the civil war there which involved us very deeply, as you recall, I was well aware of what he had been doing as ambassador to Laos. Even if I had not met him personally before, I felt as though I knew him very deeply because we had followed that situation in Laos very closely when I was in Vietnam.

LC: Did he have a sense, I'm sure he must have on some level, of who you were and what your experiences had been?

JM: Oh, yes. I think so. Actually, I'm pretty sure that I did meet him because particularly during the first year or year-and-a-half that I was in Vietnam, our ambassadors in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand used to get together periodically at each others' countries to discuss the problems of interest to all of them. When they came to Saigon, I remember Ambassador Durbrow used to invite me to sit in on at least some of the discussions among the ambassadors.

LC: Right. So he was a figure that you knew and certainly had a very good sense of.

JM: Yeah. Exactly.

LC: Tell me, how did you come to know him better during this year? Did you have a chance to speak with him privately?

JM: Oh, yeah. Since he was the State Department deputy commandant I think he came to know all of the State Department students there. At some point during the year I think he invited each of them to lunch at his house. I think he followed the activities of the students quite closely. I think he knew that because of my Vietnam experience the military students were very interested. This was the war they were engaged in, most of whom had not had Vietnam experience at that point. They knew that it was a developing conflict. Since I had had that experience they were very interested in my views, so I interacted very extensively with many of the military students during the ten months I was there.

LC: I can well believe that you were sought out.

JM: Right.

LC: Can you remember, Joe, any of the persons who were a part of the class? Let's start with the Foreign Service Office contingent.

JM: Several of them subsequently became ambassadors. One became ambassador to, I think, Chile and I know to India and later director general of the Foreign Service. Interestingly, I can't think of this name of the moment. Interestingly enough, he was a very shy, retiring individual. He didn't make that much of a mark during the year he was at the National War College, but he certainly had a very distinguished career subsequently. Let me think of some others. I can think of another who was the director of, I guess, East African Affairs when I was ambassador to Madagascar. His name was Wendell Coote. I don't think he advanced much farther in the Foreign Service than that directorship. I'm trying to think of some others, Laura.

LC: How would you spell Mr. Coote's last name?

JM: C-O-O-T-E, I think was the way he spelled it. Let me see whether I can think of any others. I know a number of—oh, another one became the ambassador to Hungary, a fellow who was very much the opposite in personality of the one I have described. Boy, he was very outgoing, quite full of himself, always willing to talk about things. I think he was a guy with six or seven kids so I guess they probably had to expand the residence when he got to Hungary. He was a guy I liked very much. On the military side some of the students reached full four-star positions. I remember there was a naval captain there who later became a four-star admiral. His name was Cousins, as I recall. A number of the students there advanced to—both military and civilians—advanced to high positions.

LC: Would you say that the climate in the War College was constructed so as to promote this kind of very open debate on issues or were there certain protocols?

JM: Yes. I would say yes.

LC: Okay. Okay. So no sort of internal messages or environmental structures that would limit the exchange between—

JM: No, no. I never felt any such pressure at all. Laura, I would like to add one other thing which I think is of some significance. The permanent staff under the level of the commandants whom I've described consisted primarily but not exclusively of personnel from the various military departments and from the civilian agencies.

Unfortunately, the tendency on the part of the personnel in all these agencies was to assign to those positions in the war colleges the officers, both military and civilian, who were not too likely to advance much farther than the positions they held. That I think is a bit of an unfortunate thing with respect to senior training which ought to have the best kind of staff and guidance. On the civilian side we had mainly professors from various universities.

LC: Would they have been on a one-year secondment there or something like that?

JM: I think usually they were there for a couple as I recall.

LC: Okay. Okay. But they would be essentially on leave from other posts.

JM: Exactly. Some of them may have been permanent but I think that was rare. I think more often they were what you've described.

LC: Do you have any sense of whether the papers that were produced by the class, where they kept? Do you know whether they were retained by the college?

JM: I imagine they were. I don't think they were distributed to the various departments of government from which the students came. It was probably just as well because since we didn't have access to the classified documents the conclusions we reached were probably not as significant by any means as those the regular employees reached because they had access to more information.

LC: Right. Well, they may have been somewhat behind the curve, though. Perhaps as a consequence of that there may have been some utility to them on a higher plane.

JM: There may have been, but you know people who are in active positions don't have all that much time to read extensively unfortunately, but that's the way the situation—that's the way the cookie crumbles.

LC: Well, would you say on balance that it was a profitable experience for you?

JM: Yes, I think so, Laura. I think it was a very good year. Perhaps, since I had had so much interconnection with the military services in Vietnam, not quite as useful for me as for a number of others, but I still look back upon it as not only a pleasant year but as a useful year. I will add one other thing, Laura, which I think is of interest. At that time in the month of March the student body was broken down into I think it was five

groups. The Department of Defense furnished an airplane to each of those five groups to take students to their continent of choice for a three-week tour of that continent. I elected Africa because I knew very little about it. So we visited nine countries in Africa, which I thought was an extremely useful thing. I learned a good deal during this tour. I came to appreciate the fact that Congressional, quote "junkets," close quote, are not all a waste of time by any means. That even a day or two in a country, if it is used profitably, can be very helpful in obtaining some view about that country. I might mention the countries that we visited if you're interested.

LC: Yes, please. Yes, absolutely.

JM: We started in Senegal. Then we went to Liberia, then to Ghana, then to Nigeria, then to Angola, South Africa, Rhodesia which later became Zimbabwe. Incidentally, in Rhodesia we had a talk by Ian Smith who was the leader of the colonists in opposing independence for that country.

LC: Interesting.

JM: We wound up in Kenya. I don't remember if that adds up to nine or not. It should. If it doesn't I've missed one.

LC: I think you may have missed one.

JM: That was a pretty good overview of Africa as you can see.

LC: Sure. Well, do you remember anything much about Mr. Smith's remarks?

JM: Well, he certainly was putting forth very strongly his point of view. He was not a particularly impressive looking individual at all, but of course he was a determined fighter for the colonists' point of view, which ultimately the British government was steadily moving away from as we know.

LC: Sure. Anything that you recall, this is something that—

JM: Laura, go ahead. If you want to ask another question go ahead.

LC: Sure. I wanted to ask about Kenya.

JM: Oh, yeah. That's what I'm—one of the people who spoke to us in Kenya was a young black by the name of Tom Mboya who at that point was considered very much a political comer in that country. Of course, Kenyatta was still in charge. He's the man who had led Kenya to independence. The main tribe in Kenya was the Kikuyu and Kenyatta came from that tribe. Mboya came from a smaller group, I think called the Luo.

He gave us as I recall a very good talk. We were very impressed with him. Subsequently, he was assassinated. So his meteoric rise politically came to a sudden end unfortunately.

LC: Joe, who within the embassy structure would be responsible for coordinating a visit like this?

JM: Well, I had coordinated one in Saigon when I was political counselor. This was before I was in the War College when a group from the War College came there under the leadership of a man who had been ambassador to five or six countries and was winding up his career as the deputy commandant of the War College. He was a man who had spent almost all of his career in Latin America. I can't think of his name at the moment, but he certainly was a very senior man in the Foreign Service and had been ambassador to many countries. I remember I coordinated their visit in Saigon.

LC: So that was actually—I mean, for it to come to the political counselor as part of his work, I mean, these were taken fairly seriously.

JM: Oh, yes, absolutely. I think in every country we visited we were dealt with extensively by ambassadors. I might mention—oh, I know the one country I skipped. We went to Congo Brazzaville. We were given the choice, I think. Some of us went to Congo Brazzaville and some went across the river to Kinshasa, the capital of the other Congo, which later became Zaire. I for some reason elected Congo Brazzaville and I remember we met with the leader of that country who was a rather unimpressive individual. Oh, I know what it was. The whole group went to Congo Brazzaville, but the morning we were to meet with the head of Congo Brazzaville we had the option of going across the river to Kinshasa for two or three hours. I don't think we were going to meet anybody very significant over there. So I elected to go to the meeting with the head of state in Congo Brazzaville, which I don't think turned out to be very significant at all, as I recall.

LC: Joe, can you sketch in just very briefly what the U.S. attitude toward de-colonization in Africa and the different processes underway then was?

JM: I think because of our long reputation as anti-colonialists, which certainly guided our policy and promoted our policy after World War II. I think we were gung-ho for de-colonization in Africa. We, of course, did get involved in some problems,

particularly in the bigger of the two Congos. We had, I think shortly before our visit—that was in what—in 1960 or '61 I think. But I think we were all in favor of de-colonization at that stage. But we did realize that there was great competition in all of these—I wouldn't say all, but in many of these newly independent states between us on the one hand and the Soviet Union and Communist China on the other for influence and support.

LC: You mentioned earlier your reason for selecting the trip to the African countries because of your hitherto lack of influence at that, or lack of—

JM: Lack of knowledge.

LC: I'm sorry, yes. Experience is what I meant. But, Joe, were you also thinking, and I wonder if you can say something more broadly here about Foreign Service career structures, were you thinking that you might very likely have an Africa appointment at some stage?

JM: I don't know that I was, Laura. My great interest at that stage was Southeast Asia. I wouldn't say, no, I wouldn't say it was excluded. It depended upon what opportunities arose at the time I became available for assignment. I don't think that particularly influenced my choice of Africa, but it certainly is a factor. The other continent, which I didn't know at all, which I could have chosen was Latin America. But I didn't have any great personal interest in Latin America. Even though the Alliance for Progress was being promoted by President Kennedy then, Latin America did not seem to play nearly as significant role in the foreign affairs of the United States as the other continents of the world.

LC: It didn't speak to you in the same way in terms of importance.

JM: No. I chose Africa over Latin America for the three weeks' tour.

LC: From time to time I understand the State Department has put on a push for regional specialists to get out of their region. I know, for example, when I talked to Tom Barnes he, of course, deeply steeped in Southeast Asia with all of his language capabilities and so forth and was sent to Morocco at some point as a result as he understood it of one of these pushes to kind of get people out of their area and to give them a push in some different direction with the supposed effect of broadening them. I just wonder whether you had any inkling that some similar big top might come your way

and influence you.

JM: Not particularly at that stage. By that point I had had seven years' experience in Southeast Asia, but I didn't feel any particular urge of that kind. Actually, thinking about this, Laura, it may be that this was a factor in the back of my mind because it did widen the possibilities for future assignment.

LC: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

JM: In that since, that may have been a minor factor in influencing my decision. I think the main factor was that I was simply—the two continents I didn't know at all were Africa and Latin America. I've just indicated that I thought Africa was of more significance, particularly in the Cold War, than Latin America was.

LC: It sounds as if it must have been a fascinating trip.

JM: Oh, it was. I enjoyed it and I thought it was very useful.

LC: And the duration again, approximately three weeks?

JM: About three weeks. But we had our own plane all the time, which was wonderful.

LC: Yes. That's quite handy, in fact. Can I ask, Joe, whether over the course of the year that you were at the National War College, were you maintaining correspondence with any friends or acquaintances in Saigon?

JM: Oh, yes. I continued to do that for many, many years. I certainly was, yes.

LC: Including Vietnamese?

JM: Yes.

LC: I'm certain this would have been a reading interest of yours in the press and so on, but certainly you were then watching events.

JM: Very closely, yes. I may have already mentioned, Laura, that I had actually little contact with the State Department, little professional contact with respect to Vietnam, but the two things of particular interest which developed during the course of that year at the War College. Walt Rostow, I think in November, invited Bill Colby who was then the head of the Far East division of CIA in Washington and myself to his office for a very long discussion about Vietnam. He knew I think that Bill and I were on the opposite sides on the fence as far as the viability of Diem, President Diem, for winning the war was concerned. I think he wanted to search our minds very deeply to see whether

he could get some inkling as to which way he should go on the issue and which way the State Department should.

LC: So this would have been in November of ’62?

JM: Yeah, exactly.

LC: He had gone to the Policy Planning Staff at that point?

JM: I think so. I think he had because it was in the State Department. So I’m pretty sure he was in the Policy Planning Staff by that stage.

LC: Well, Joe, what can you tell me about that set of discussions that afternoon?

JM: Well, what came out clearly, of course, was the fact that Colby and I had long recognized that we were completely on opposite sides of the fence on this issue. We remained that way. As a matter of fact, when Colby wrote his book *A Lost Victory* in the early 1970s, I reviewed it for the magazine *Strategic Review*. I think I started out that Colby and I have been on the opposite side on this issue for well over a decade. In view of the events that occurred subsequent to the overthrow of Diem that he may have been right, although I still felt that in the end that I think as I’ve already explained in our interviews, I felt it was better for us that Diem went and that eventually we had Thieu as president.

LC: What do you think—did Rostow sort of open it up to the two of you to grapple with what were the contemporary concerns about Diem or did you go back into events into the 1950s as well? Do you remember?

JM: Yes, certainly into the events that led up to the increasing internal non-communist opposition to Diem. I’m sure we went back into that. I can’t remember the details of the discussion now, but I’m sure that we explored every angle of it and what was quite a lengthy session.

LC: How did you and Mr. Colby, Ambassador Colby, get along even though you were disagreeing?

JM: Bill Colby and I always remained friends, as a matter of fact. We stayed in contact. Actually, after he broke up with his wife Barbara then I think the relationship did cool considerably. I don’t think we saw him subsequent to that time.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: Yeah, but that was, of course, much, much later. Bill and I did remain

friends. In 1969 when I was the head of the Vietnam Bureau in the AID agency in Washington and we were very deeply involved in helping to fund and supply personnel to the CORDS organization in Vietnam, CORDS being the counter-insurgency outfit that had been set up in Vietnam a couple of years earlier. Colby was then the head of it. When I went out to Vietnam I had considerable interplay with him over this. We had no disagreements at that stage. We were both very much on the same side as far as the counter-insurgency campaign was concerned.

LC: So it sounds like a healthy relationship although one punctuated by difference.

JM: Exactly. On the other hand, I remember quite a number of personal friendships in our own case which were severed forever as a result of differences in our approaches to the Vietnam War. Colby and I were on the same side basically as far as the war was concerned. It was just over Diem that we differed. But with these other friends the difference was whether we should have been involved in the Vietnam War or not. That, as I think I've said before, Laura, led to the complete cutoff of friendships I had as well as others that I think I've mentioned, the one between Ambassador Nolting and Bill Trueheart who was the man Nolting had chosen as his number two in the embassy in Saigon. Long personal friends and that friendship came to a total end as a result of differences of theirs over Diem.

LC: Yes. You mentioned that there were a couple of meetings and this one with Rostow and Bill—

JM: The other one was not with the State Department actually. I think I mentioned it in the previous session, the session I had with David Halberstam at the National Press Club at his initiative. That one I think I've already described to you, Laura.

LC: Let me ask while we're speaking about Halberstam. Did you know Charles Moore of *Time?*

JM: No. That name doesn't ring any bells.

LC: Okay, I just wondered. He was in Saigon, I think, even earlier than Halberstam. I just wondered if it was someone that you had crossed paths with.

JM: That one I don't recall.

LC: Okay. During the year that you were at the National War College, of course, there were a couple of very important events in South Vietnam that I just want to run past you, Joe, for your commentary. The first of them is the January 1963 battle at Ap Bac in the Delta. Can you tell me what you thought of that at the time, if you saw many press releases about it?

JM: Laura, I can't specifically recall what I thought about it at the time, although I think because of my distrust of both the South Vietnamese military reporting and that by our own top level military in Vietnam over the way the war was going at that stage, I think I felt that that battle had really gone quite badly. Later, of course, I learned that John Paul Vann had been involved deeply in that one and had felt that it showed, contrary to the official position being taken by the top level Vietnamese government and top level U.S. military, that the conflict had shown the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese forces which were being overlooked by our own military.

LC: Something that didn't surprise you, of course.

JM: No. It did not. Of course, I did not know Vann at that stage at all. He was then—I think he was either a major or lieutenant colonel military advisor to the South Vietnamese units involved in that conflict. He felt they had not conducted themselves well and that the reports that were made to Diem were very much influenced by the fact that the commander, I think, was a Colonel Cao on the South Vietnamese side. That he was expected to make a favorable report to President Diem or he risked being removed from his military position. No. I think I've indicated I later came to know Vann quite well. He, of course, broke with his own military over his differences in the assessment of how well things were going militarily in Vietnam. He resigned from the military and later went back to Vietnam with the AID agency and became extremely important in the counter-insurgency campaign but on the civilian side.

LC: Joe, can you just put down a marker for us later? When did you actually meet John Vann?

JM: Oh, I'm trying to think. I first actually met him, I think probably in 1968 when I became deputy to Jim Grant for a few months in the Vietnam bureau in AID and we both went out to Vietnam in August of '68 on a visit. Then certainly my subsequent visit when I was the head of that bureau in January of '69, I had a lot of interplay with

Vann.

LC: Well, we'll come back to that later on.

JM: Yeah, that came much later. Laura, you might be interested in this point with respect to my year at the National War College.

LC: Sure.

JM: By springtime I began to become obviously quite interested in what my next assignment was going to be because in two or three months I would be up for assignment. I was interested in either—because of my level as Foreign Service officer Class II—either as a deputy director of an office in the State Department, an office being the bureaucratic level between the desk for a particular country and the assistant secretary for a continent. An office usually consisted of—its responsibility consisted of several countries in a region, the office of Southeast Asian Affairs for example, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Malaya and Singapore. I thought at that level I probably could not aspire to be an office director. They were usually Class I, not invariably but usually a deputy director position, or a position as a deputy chief of mission in an embassy of interest. In other words, the number two in an embassy of some significance. Well, it turned out that the only deputy chief of mission that was going to open at that time was in the Ivory Coast in Africa. That was a pretty small mission. So I decided that was not one which really enticed me. I was called by Woody Waliner, the deputy assistant secretary for International Organization Affairs in the State Department, to come over for a meeting. He offered me the deputy directorship of the Office of Economic and Social Affairs in that bureau. Well, that was the office and a position of which I had turned down, as I think I said much earlier in 1955. I still wasn't interested in what they were doing. So I thanked him but no thanks was my answer to his offer of a deputy directorship there. Bill Sullivan, who I had come to know earlier in the office of Southeast Asian Affairs when I was the Vietnam desk officer and he was the Burma desk officer, was then special assistant to Averell Harriman, who was the number three in the department. He tried to interest me in going to Recife in northeastern Brazil as the consul general. He said in Latin America, at least in Brazil, a new approach was being pursued, which combined the personnel positions of the State Department man and the AID agency man into one individual in that country and that great emphasis was being placed

on Recife as the chief [city] in northeastern Brazil and that this would be a great opportunity for me. Well, even though Bill was a close friend of mine he did not succeed in talking me into that one. About that time, I was asked by Roger Hilsman who was the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, to come over and talk about rejoining the East Asian Bureau because he was quite interested in my Vietnam experience. As a matter of fact, his views and mine on what was happening in Vietnam were pretty similar at that point. The only thing he had available at the time I was to become available was the position of United Nations advisor, which was a position that had been of very considerable importance in the 1950s under Walter Robertson as assistant secretary when one of our principal policy goals was to preserve Nationalist China as the member for China in the Security Council for the UN. The UN advisor in East Asian Affairs had been the principal agent of the assistant secretary in carrying out that policy. I think I mentioned this earlier that was Ruth Bacon. Did I mention this?

LC: No. I don't think so.

JM: Well, Ruth Bacon was, I think, a very capable lady who had pursued this policy vigorously on behalf of—it was a policy not just of the assistant secretary, of course, but of the secretary of state and of the U.S. government pursued this policy vigorously, particularly in her dealings with the Bureau of International Organization Affairs. I think she had done it so vigorously that she had alienated a number of those people, including one who became extremely significant subsequently in the State Department structure, Joe Sisco. Ruth, although she became available later for assignment abroad was given the rather insignificant position of deputy chief of mission in our embassy in New Zealand. Though there was great emphasis then on finding very favorable positions for women in the Foreign Service, Ruth's strong defense of what was the U.S. government policy, I think, reacted against her when it came to her career. She did not go nearly as far as I thought she should have on the basis of her ability, even though she was a woman at a time when women were being pushed up.

LC: That's interesting. So she was essentially in some ways sidelined.

JM: She was, unfortunately for the rest of her career, which was because of Sisco's increasing influence.

LC: Although, Wellington's gorgeous.

JM: I'm sure. So was Switzerland, but I told you it turned out that I shouldn't have spent three years in Switzerland. I don't think from a career standpoint Wellington helped her at all. Anyway, Hilsman offered me this position and he said, and this was the clincher, he said, "In each of the geographic bureaus in the State Department, including East Asian Affairs, we are moving toward establishing an Office of Regional Affairs, which will absorb all of the positions which had consisted of various advisory positions to the assistant secretary, the United Nations advisor, labor advisor, planning advisor. There were quite a number of them, one of whom had been Marshall Green, who had a very distinguished career. Marshall had been planning advisor to the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, I think during almost all the time, the four years that I was assigned there from '55-'59. So he had used this position to show how capable he was and then became the consul general in Hong Kong, which I think I've already explained was the most significant consul general position we had in the Foreign Service. So Hilsman said all these positions—oh, and also the SEATO advisor, because SEATO was then considered a pretty significant—well, we were attempting to make it a significant organization. So the position had considerable significance. So, all these were to be combined in an office. Then Hilsman said that Dick Usher, who was then the planning advisor and was senior to me as a Class II officer, would become the director, but I would become the deputy director. This clinched it and I decided to accept this. It turned out that both as United Nations advisor and as deputy director of the office when it was established both proved to be pretty nominal as far as I was concerned because Hilsman used me very much as special assistant to him for Vietnam. He had me working on Vietnam affairs virtually all the time even though there was a Vietnam Working Group with a director who was also deputy director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. Hilsman had me working concurrently with him, I think partly because he didn't have that much confidence in the man who was in that position, which was Paul Kattenburg.

LC: When did you take up this position? Was it called deputy director?

JM: No. It was in June. I became first the United Nations advisor. Then I think by September the office had been established. I became the deputy director of the Office of East Asian Regional Affairs. As I said it was almost all Vietnam [for me]. Then in November of '63 Hilsman decided to fire Katttenburg and asked me to take over as the

director of the Vietnam Working Group. [I] would serve concurrently as one of the two deputy directors of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. So I was back fully in Vietnam affairs by November. I had been pretty much that in effect ever since June.

LC: Did you understand? You said that Hilsman had told you that this change was coming up and that you would move to the deputy directorship, but did he also telegraph or perhaps flat out state that he wanted your Vietnam experience on board?

JM: It was clear he did. He discussed that a good deal.

LC: Okay. Let's take a break there, Joe.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [22] of [57]
Date: July 22, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-second of July 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. The ambassador is speaking to me by telephone from Nevada. Joe, you mentioned that you might want to make some observations about your own personal experience at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. What can you tell me about that?

Joseph Mendenhall: This was, of course, during the time I was a student at the National War College. I was not involved in any way, shape or form with that crisis. The only thing I thought might be interesting for the record was how my family and I handled and reacted to the night President Kennedy made the speech which laid down the gauntlet to Khrushchev and the Soviet Union not to install missiles in Cuba. This speech was scheduled for seven o'clock eastern time. I pulled my family, my wife and my three kids, into the only part of our house which might provide not even a modicum, I should say virtually no shelter, but the only thing possible against nuclear missiles if they started raining on Washington. We retired to an inner room, mainly underground next to the furnace room and listened to the speech which was actually a very short one where Kennedy said that the Navy was being deployed to halt Soviet ships moving toward Cuba with missiles and that unless the Soviets turned around there would be a real crisis. Well, we listened to the short speech and then I kept the family in that inner room for about fifteen or twenty minutes to see whether the missiles would actually start raining on Washington. That shows how uncertain we were, and as I'm sure Kennedy himself was, about what would happen, whether Khrushchev would decide to back off, which he did, of course. The crisis was then over. To my mind this was the greatest crisis the United States has faced since the Civil War. If Kennedy had been right about the missile gap, which he proclaimed during his campaign for the presidency in 1960, I am very dubious that Khrushchev would have backed down. Khrushchev knew there was no missile gap. I think by that stage Kennedy realized that

he had erroneously assessed the situation, I don't know whether honestly or not. To me there's some comparability between Kennedy's being elected on the basis of this assessment of a missile gap between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and the charges that Bush didn't handle correctly the intelligence that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction in the run up to the Iraq War. Interesting parallel there. Of course, the cards are changed. The tables are changed politically. Then it was the Democrats in power and now it's the Republicans. So the charges came from the opposite side. History has some interesting parallels in the respect I've just pointed out.

LC: Well, Joe, there was also at the time, evidently as we've later learned the perception gap, too, between what Khrushchev actually thought of Kennedy's resolve when they first met in Vienna in, I believe 1961. We talked about that and then what actually happened during the time that we're speaking about now, the Cuban Missile Crisis a year-and-a-half later. Khrushchev himself miscalculated.

JM: I think that's absolutely correct, Laura. He miscalculated because Kennedy had shown such weakness at the time of the Bay of Pigs, at the time of the Lao crisis in the summer of '61 and in the meeting at Vienna. All of which demonstrates to me that a president has to show very firm resolve and calculate not only the present, but what may happen in the future in decisions he makes at the time.

LC: Would you go a step further with me that it's not simply the public relations aspect within the domestic sphere that's important, but in terms of resolve?

JM: Laura, this goes to a very basic point I have about foreign and security policies. That is that the most important thing in that whole realm is for the United States to maintain its credibility. There is no deterrent without credibility. If there's not a credible feeling on the part of your enemy or your potential enemy that we will stand strong, then the risk of war becomes much, much greater than it would be otherwise.

LC: I think that's the point that's often underplayed to the detriment of many analyses of this period and certainly later periods, too.

JM: I agree. I agree. Well, to me it's still an extremely important one. I think the fact that we eventually lost the war in Vietnam was a major blow to our credibility. I think we've discussed this in some previous sessions, led to many subsequent developments which were to the disadvantage of the United States. Indeed in Iraq today

there still is undoubtedly a feeling among the insurgents that if they hold out long enough the U.S. will lose its resolve and pull out.

LC: Undoubtedly.

JM: I think there's still this effect of the loss of the war in Vietnam.

LC: Of course, this also provided part of the rationale—well, again, this is something that you can agree with or disagree with or disregard, but part of the rationale for committing forces in Vietnam certainly could be argued had in some ways little to do with Vietnam but it certainly had to do with the larger stage with U.S. relations with the other powers, both the Soviet Union and China.

JM: Mm-hmm. Exactly.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about that time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. You kept the kids downstairs for fifteen minutes.

JM: Fifteen to twenty minutes after the speech ended to see if the missiles were going to begin to rain on Washington. We lived in the suburbs, about ten miles out, but that wouldn't have provided, I doubt that would have provided much shelter. One, the missiles might not have been guided quite right. They may not have been quite that accurate and the fall-out, even if it hit central Washington, might have hit us as well.

LC: There's no question you were in the zone. What did you say to the kids? Do you remember?

JM: Well, I told them quite frankly what the situation was so that they would understand it. As I recall now, there was no panic on their part, but there was nothing anybody could do about it. Laura, I'll draw another analogy, which is maybe not quite so apt, but it still is. I had been in small planes twice when it was thought that the landing gear had collapsed while we were up and that we might have to go in for a belly landing with all the risks that that entails. All you can do under those circumstances as a passenger in the airplane is simply tighten your seatbelt a little more. There's not much else you can do. You've got to ride with it.

LC: I ask because one of the things that parents worry about now is how to explain things like 9/11 and terrorist attacks and the subway bombings in London. How do they explain that kind of thing to their kids? Certainly it has some impact on them, although not with any degree of immediacy that you confronted in 1962 in the fall.

JM: No. There isn't although there is certainly a risk today to, I think, anybody in the western world because nobody can be a hundred percent sure of their security. Look what happened in London yesterday, two weeks after the bombings in the subway, a new attempt. There's certainly no one-hundred-percent assurance that we will not be subject to terrorist attacks again here in the U.S. Of course, the worst thing of all is if we were subject to a terrorist nuclear or biological or chemical warfare attack.

LC: Could you, at this distance and with looking back at 1962, give us your assessment of the president's performance during the Cuban Missile Crisis in general, both maybe what you thought at the time and how things might have changed?

JM: Laura, I think what I thought at the time is not quite the same as what I think with more mature assessment. Actually, Kennedy's handling of the missile crisis was I think very definitely the highest point in his administration as far as his performance was concerned. He did handle that quite capably but he also, as the record turned out, agreed to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey as part of the bargain with the Soviet Union. So he gave to a degree just as Khrushchev. Khrushchev, I think, gave more than Kennedy did. But looking back, Laura, and I think maybe we've mentioned this before in these talks, I think that Kennedy's performance on the whole in the foreign policy field was a relatively weak one. He ranks in my estimation in one of the lower estimates of the U.S. presidents in the post-war period. My personal estimate is that the best presidents in the foreign policy field since World War II have been Harry Truman, a Democrat, and Ronald Reagan, a Republican. The present Bush may land in that category, but the evidence isn't all in yet. We'll have to see what happens during the remainder of his administration, but these are the two presidents I think who have had the greatest influence on America's position in the world and strengthening that position of any during the post-war period.

LC: I think the case for Truman is probably fairly widely accepted. On more recent presidents, of course, the case is more fluid simply because the assessments are newer and not all the documents are available.

JM: I would agree with what you just said, Laura. I don't think I'd get as much agreement on Reagan as I do Truman.

LC: Which makes me—

JM: I wouldn't have gotten that agreement on Truman when he left office, either.

LC: This is true.

JM: We were still caught in the Korean War crisis and Truman's popularity, I think, at the time he left office, political popularity in America was just about at its nadir.

LC: Well, just off the cuff can you offer a few pieces of support for your praise for President Reagan?

JM: Well, I think he was the man who finally assured victory in the long Cold War with the Soviets. It was Cold War in part but it was also hot in part because we fought communists in both Korea and Vietnam. So it wasn't just a Cold War as far as we were concerned, the war against the communists. Now today we've got the war against radical Islamic terrorists, which I think will probably last for a long, long time. Who knows what the ultimate outcome will be, but I think their objective is to try to reestablish Islamic domination in the world. I think the chances of their achieving success, the chances are much greater against their achieving success than they are that they would do so, but who can say what the outcome will be. One thing that strikes me these days, I don't think I have seen anybody in the media or even in government draw a parallel between the suicide bombers today, which are certainly proving to be an effective radical Islamic weapon, and the Japanese will to suicide, including the *kamikaze* bombers in World War II. There is a considerable, not a total, but a considerable parallel there. I haven't seen anybody talking about that.

LC: I haven't either, or much talk about the long post-war history of terrorist attacks in the Middle East to destabilize western governments, which goes way back to 1948 and even earlier, certainly with the Palestinian Mandate and all the rest. Well, as historians, Joe, we have plenty of work to do. There's no question about that.

JM: Exactly, Laura. All this is in the realm of history and high policy decisions, Laura, which I'm certainly too old to affect in any way whatsoever however much I might have done so in a minor way when I was active.

LC: Well, you certainly did do so. There's no question about that. Let me ask, Joe, just one more question on the Cuban Missile Crisis. As it happened, you were at the National War College. How much did you and your course mates spend studying the

New York Times and the *Washington Post* and trying to figure out what was happening and discussing all of that?

JM: Obviously, among my colleagues and particularly military, but not exclusively, there was the greatest of interest in that. I can't recall now how much discussion we had of it. Of course, a lot of what was going on in Washington was kept pretty hush-hush at the time, as you know. Everybody at the War College was extremely interested in this great crisis.

LC: Was there much sense at that time about the influence of Robert Kennedy as attorney general but also, particularly in these discussions during the crisis itself? Were people aware?

JM: I don't recall that there was. I'm going to deal with this in a glancing way when we get back into our mainstream theme in these talks.

LC: Well, Joe, we had discussed the many offers that were made to you in the spring of 1963 as you were leaving the National War College, several of which you've described as not too appealing. You did in June, I believe, become the United Nations advisor for the Far Eastern Bureau. Is that correct?

JM: As I indicated the last time, that proved to be a nominal title because the principal function, as it turned out, was to act as a special assistant to the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs on Vietnam affairs because of the experience I had in Vietnam for the three years I was there as political counselor, plus a year-and-a-half in Washington prior to that time. My main function, as it turned out, was dealing with Vietnam and whatever *ad hoc* issues Hilsman, the assistant secretary, wanted to throw my way.

LC: Was there much—well, let me frame it this way. Did the United Nations, for which you had at least some advisory responsibility in terms of the bureau at this time, did the United Nations have much of a take on the Vietnam issue?

JM: No. There was one particular issue which I'll raise a little later, Laura, in chronological context. But by and large, the United Nations was involved very little in the Vietnam affair.

LC: Now, during the summer of 1963 in Saigon, of course, events were rolling on with force and particularly the development of what's known as the Buddhist crisis, the

series of demonstrations led by Buddhist priests. As you were taking responsibility under Hilsman for the different *ad hoc* issues that were coming up how much time did you spend monitoring events in Saigon?

JM: Well, I followed events there extremely closely since that's obviously what Hilsman wanted me to focus on. I was not, however, at first the man in charge of the Vietnam affairs. Hilsman did have a director of the Vietnam Working Group in the form of Paul Kattenburg who handled the day-to-day activities. He answered the cables coming from Saigon normally, but I got involved in some of the more longer-range problems as far as Hilsman was concerned.

LC: Now Kattenburg—

JM: I will say, Laura, that one big issue that came up early on, the famous mid-August telegram from Washington to Saigon to ask Lodge the ambassador to encourage the military to go ahead with a coup, that telegram was developed and sent out on a Saturday. I was not in the department that weekend. So I had had nothing to do with that telegram. The main people pushing that telegram were Hilsman, the assistant secretary, and Harriman, who was the undersecretary for political affairs. That was his title at that stage, the number three in the department. Of course, that telegram became extremely controversial because neither McNamara nor General Taylor, who by that time was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were in town this weekend and complained bitterly that they were not there to clear it. But it was cleared by Ross, I think his name is Kilpatrick, who was the number two man in the Department of Defense. Actually, Kennedy wasn't in town that weekend either. He was up at Hyannis Port, but Mike Forrestal who was on the National Security Council staff as the man dealing with Vietnam and who sort of shepherded the clearances on this telegram told Kennedy that it had been cleared by all the departments concerned. Kennedy signed off on it. He later charged Forrestal with misleading him and said, "You definitely owe me one in the future." He didn't turn against him, but he said, "You really owe me because I feel as though I was misled as to who had cleared that telegram before it went out." As it turned out, of course, no action resulted from that telegram as far as the Vietnamese generals are concerned. This led Lodge, who had relayed the message to them, that the generals were mush and couldn't be counted upon for any action against Diem. That was the

outcome of that to-do over this telegram at that particular stage in history.

LC: Do you know anything about the generals themselves, the calculus that they had in not acting this time?

JM: Laura, the calculus was that they had to be very sure of their position that if they launched a coup that it would be successful because their lives were at stake. If the coup failed they knew that they would not survive. That was how significant it was to the military men in Vietnam who it was thought might lead the coup. Again, I'll get into that a little bit later when we come to the actual coup a couple of months later.

LC: Well, Joe, there are a number of people whose names you've mentioned who I think we could stand to have your insight on. I want to start with Paul Kattenburg. He's someone who was very important, at least in terms of his position within the State Department hierarchy on Vietnam affairs at this point. He, of course, disappears with rapidity within, what, six month or something.

JM: Laura, can I deal with him also a little later?

LC: Okay. That would be fine.

JM: Many of these things will arise in chronological order.

LC: Sure. Would you like to offer a little bit more background on the thinking behind that mid-August telegram?

JM: Well, the trigger for that was the attack by the Special Forces in Vietnam at Nhu's instigation on the chief Buddhist pagoda in Vietnam in Saigon shortly before. This had set off a furor of reaction all over the world as a matter of fact, and particularly in the United States. That was the thing that really brought about this telegram at that particular stage to try to encourage the military in Vietnam to move because of what had happened. Two weeks later, interestingly enough, Kennedy himself made a public declaration that policies by the Vietnamese government, that policies and perhaps personnel in the Vietnamese government need to change because of the reaction to the way the Diem government was handling the Buddhist crisis. That was a very significant signal on Kennedy's part. He had never gone that far in any public statement before. Policies need to change and perhaps personnel. That was in effect the way he put it in the public statement.

LC: Was that seen to be a reference primarily to Ngo Dinh Nhu?

JM: Well, it was left vague. I think Kennedy probably had principally in mind Ngo Dinh Nhu, but the public statement was not explicit at all. I think he probably did have Nhu in mind at that stage. Then shortly after this statement by Kennedy, it may have even been in the same week, was when one of Kennedy's frequent meetings with the National Security Council on Vietnam was held on a Friday. I know it was on a Friday morning, I guess the first Friday in September at the White House in the morning. Hilsman was at that meeting. He came back and said that Kennedy had decided that he wanted to send someone out to Vietnam for a firsthand personal assessment of the situation there, both military and political. That Kennedy had nominated General Krulak as the man to go. It was pretty widely known in Washington that Krulak and most of our military were very firmly in support of Diem. So either Hilsman, Harriman, or [McGeorge Bundy], I've forgotten which one now, spoke up and said, "What about sending a State Department representative with him?" Kennedy agreed to that, but no names were mentioned at that stage. When they got back to the department, Hilsman urged Rusk to send me. Rusk at first demurred on the grounds that my views that had become anti-Diem at that stage for reasons I've explained earlier were well known. Therefore maybe this department should send someone else who did not have the reputation of that position. But Hilsman succeeded in convincing him. Hilsman came down to call me in and said, "You are going to Vietnam." This was by that time it was about eleven o'clock in the morning. "You are to be at the helicopter pad at the Pentagon at one o'clock to leave." I said, "Well, I'll need some clothes and some money." He said, "I'll call your wife to get some clothes and money for you. You get home and get your suitcase packed and your money and get to that helicopter pad by one o'clock." I think it was probably the first time in history that the assistant secretary of state has called the wife to tell her to get her husband ready for travel, a subordinate ready for travel. That's what happened. Nonie rushed to a bank to get some money. She didn't have my clothes completely packed. I always did that myself, but she had some idea of what I wanted. So I was at that helicopter pad by 1:00PM. Krulak and I, we got into a helicopter. McNamara, the secretary of defense, was furnishing his KC-135 in which he traveled when he made official trips. It was a, I think they called it a tanker plane. It had no windows. It was a huge plane. Krulak and I took the helicopter

over to Andrews Air Force Base. We got on this huge plane, just the two of us as passengers rumbling around. We each knew the reputation and the views of the other so I can't say that it was an extremely friendly journey, although I think it was a civil one throughout both ways. I think we stopped, I guess it was in California to gas up and flew on to Okinawa where we found that we could not proceed to Vietnam that night. We left Washington Friday at 1:00PM. We crossed the International Date Line. We got to Okinawa. It was Saturday evening there. We learned that we could not proceed to Vietnam until later because there was a curfew forbidding any planes to land at Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon until 6:00AM. So Krulak and I went to the normal Saturday night officers dance at the officers club in Okinawa. Then I tried to get a few hours of broken sleep and we left at 3:00AM Japanese time to fly to Saigon to arrive just after six there. So that was the trip out. You can see how rapid it was from eleven o'clock in the morning Washington time on Friday, crossing the International Date Line and we were in Saigon by Sunday morning, which was about a half-a-day later in terms of lapsed time in a sense. Shall I proceed with this?

LC: Yes, please.

JM: Yeah. Well, I knew what Krulak was going to do. He was going to travel to a lot of provinces in a jet furnished by the American military command there and get back to Washington and say, "I've been in X number, a lot of provinces, and the war is going just fine. The political turmoil in Saigon isn't affecting it at all and everything is just fine as far as the war itself is concerned," leaving political considerations completely aside, which aren't really affecting the way it is progressing. So I immediately went to the embassy in Saigon to see Lodge, the ambassador, and he knew views. He knew what was up then. He said, "Well, the only thing I can furnish you in order to try to counter that is the air attaché's propeller plane, not a jet, which will take four hours just to reach central Vietnam." I said, "I'll take that so I can in some way try to counter the charge I knew Krulak would make that I hadn't gotten outside of Saigon to see what was going on in the provinces and on the ground." So I took this plane up to Hue and picked up the consul, John Helble, whom I had known. He had worked for me earlier in Saigon. John had already been there at that point, been in Vietnam at that point, about three years. I knew he had excellent local contacts. I can't remember now

what Vietnamese John put me in touch with in Hue. Then we went over to Da Nang, which were the two principal cities in central Vietnam. But we had lots of conversation with him and with Americans in both places. Then I flew back to Saigon on Monday morning and learned that Bill Trueheart, the number two man in the embassy, the deputy chief of mission, had arranged a luncheon at his residence with Pham Dang Lam, who was the number two in the foreign office. At that stage the foreign minister had already resigned because of the Buddhist crisis. He was opposed to the Diem policy. That's Vu Van Mau. I've forgotten who was running the foreign office, but Lam I had known extremely well when I was in Vietnam. We were good friends both professionally and personally and Trueheart knew that. He had as high a regard for Lam's objectivity, calmness, and good common sense as I did. When we got to the luncheon Lam and Trueheart pointed out that it was dangerous for Lam even to be seen there at an American home because at that point under Nhu's inspiration, Americans were being targeted for assassination. Trueheart was on one list himself for assassination and the Vietnamese, too, had been ordered to try to curtail any contacts between any lower-level Vietnamese and American officials. At that time relations were extremely strained between our embassy and the Vietnamese. Lodge had arrived in Vietnam with a totally different approach towards Diem and Nhu than had been followed by Fritz Nolting, the previous ambassador. Lodge presented his credentials to Diem and then very coolly refrained from asking for any further meetings with Diem in order to try to bring some political pressure on him. So relations between the embassy and the Vietnamese were at an extremely low level at that point. Relations between the U.S. military command and Diem were still quite close. So at this luncheon Pham Dang Lam explained to me in very quiet, unemotional terms about the reign of terror which was really being exercised in Vietnam at that point and that the government was in effect paralyzed by it in terms of any effective action. After that luncheon I did proceed to try to find another Vietnamese, a high Vietnamese official whom I knew quite well. I can't think of his name at the moment. I'm sorry. That name eludes me. But anyway, I found that he was at a meeting with lots of other Vietnamese. I arrived at the building where the meeting was being held. I sent word in to him that I was there and would like to talk to him. He emerged from the meeting and he and I stood in a corner, a very remote corner and talked

for maybe twenty minutes or a half-hour and he expressed—he again was a man whose judgment I trusted very much. He expressed the same views as Lam as to the total ineffectiveness at that stage of the central government in Vietnam. It was in effect paralyzed as far as the governmental action was concerned. So those were the two people who from my experience in Vietnam I knew I could trust their assessment and that they would react in a very calm and collected manner in expressing their views to me. I went back to the embassy. I drafted a telegram, a brief telegram to Washington with a summary of my assessment of the situation on the basis of what I had seen. By 6:00PM that day, that was Monday, Krulak and I were back on the plane, headed back to Washington. So we had been on the ground about thirty-six hours in Vietnam. There's the story of the Krulak-Mendenhall mission to Vietnam as far as the Vietnam end of it was concerned.

LC: Well, can I ask just a couple of questions about the Vietnam end of it?

JM: Sure.

LC: When you were on the streets and getting around, either in Hue, Da Nang or in Saigon, were you observing on the streets some of the repercussions from the crackdown against the Buddhists?

JM: No. They didn't occur every day anyway, Laura. I didn't see any of that myself during the brief time I was there. No. I can't say that I did.

LC: Was there military presence on the streets at all that you remember?

JM: Again, I do not recall that I observed any overwhelming military presence there. After all, what Diem and Nhu had used primarily were the Special Forces, a unit that was closely attached to Nhu. They hadn't used the regular armed forces all that much because they didn't have that much confidence in them.

LC: Right. They were reporting to the generals who were the ones who were potentially leading and ultimately did.

JM: They may have felt that some of the officers would respond to them and they felt they couldn't trust a number of them.

LC: What was the ambassador's demeanor while you were there?

JM: Well, he certainly knew what was going on in both Washington and in Vietnam. Lodge was a very cool individual himself and handled things in a very

reserved, almost patriarchal manner. He knew that what the purpose of the Krulak-Mendenhall mission was and he did his best to accommodate the views that he and I held, very similar ones.

LC: When on Monday evening you and the general both appeared presumably at a Tan Son Nhut—

JM: Yes. That's right.

LC: Did you shake hands with him or did you speak to him very extensively?

JM: Oh, we were always civil. I think he used the time to prepare his report that he was going to make. Incidentally, I'd heard, I don't know whether before this mission or before subsequent ones on which Krulak went, that Krulak usually prepared the first draft of his report before he left Washington and before he got to Vietnam to look over the situation. In this case, whether he was working on one, which he had first drafted and had prepared for when he was doing it from the outset, on the plane on the way. We did not talk very much because we were both, I think, very tired for one thing and the other thing we were both absorbed in our own thoughts and in the reports. I had sent my brief. I don't think I was preparing another written one. I had sent mine by telegram from the embassy and he was preparing his. We were joined on the flight back by two men who were completing their tours in Vietnam. One was the chief of USIS, Mechlin, M-E-C-H-L-I-N, and the other was Rufus Phillips, a man who had considerable experience with Vietnam who had been in the AID mission then for at least a couple of years I think and had been in charge of all the provincial operations of the AID mission. So he was a man quite familiar, more familiar I would say than almost any other civilian with what was going on in the provinces and in the countryside. These two men joined us. Again, I think we had some conversation, but I don't think we had anything very extensive. Again, we crossed the International Date Line going back and we arrived in Washington at 6:00AM on Tuesday morning. I was told to be in the White House for the National Security Council meeting at 10:00AM. I think I did get time to go home and freshen up a bit and was at this meeting presided over by Kennedy. You may be interested in the people who were at this mission. On the part of the State Department it was Rusk, McNamara, Hilsman, and myself if you count me. From the Pentagon McNamara, Taylor, the General Taylor, the chairman of the JCS, and Bill Bundy, who

was by that point assistant secretary for International Security Affairs in the Pentagon, McCone, the director of CIA, Bobby—no, Bobby Kennedy I don't think was there. I'll withdraw that. I don't think he was at that session—McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor, plus Krulak and the other two men who had been on the plane with us. I think that pretty well covers them. I may have left somebody out but those were all the principal figures there at any rate.

LC: Were Mechlin and Phillips also there to give a report? Was that why they were—?

JM: All four of us were seated in chairs in the rear to see whether we would be called upon or not. Kennedy first called on Krulak who presented his very optimistic report as to the way the military war was going. Then he called on me and I moved up. I was asked to take the chair right opposite Kennedy, which was the vice president's chair at these meetings, but he was absent. He was not at that meeting. So I gave my report rather briefly along the lines I had indicated and when I finished is when Kennedy made his famous quip. He looked at both of us and said, "Have you both been in the same country?" That, of course, has made a lot of books that were written about the Kennedy administration, as I'm sure you've seen. Then Kennedy did call on both Mechlin and Phillips to make reports. Both of their reports coincided pretty closely with mine. Phillips, I think, represented an additional factor in countering Krulak's report because of his experience in the provinces.

LC: Was there a chuckle in the room when the president made his quip?

JM: Oh, yes. I think he laughed himself, as a matter of fact. I should add at this point after I had finished my report—oh, another significant person who was at that meeting whom I skipped was former Ambassador Nolting. As soon as I finished my report Nolting tried to discredit my credibility by pointing out that I had been anti-Diem for quite some time. The man who sprang to my defense at that stage was McGeorge Bundy, which cut off Nolting pretty effectively.

LC: Do you remember the force of what Bundy said?

JM: Well, I can't remember exactly what I said but all I do remember was he—I've forgotten what the thrust was of what he said. It may be in some of the historical documents that have come out since, but I was rather—I didn't know

McGeorge Bundy personally so I was quite surprised that he did. I could have expected somebody like Harriman or Hilsman to have done that, but McGeorge Bundy did surprise me.

LC: Did you remain in the room as the meeting progressed?

JM: Yeah. We remained in the room. There were no decisions taken on the basis of that meeting at all. As a matter of fact, about, oh, I would say, three or four weeks later Kennedy decided to send another mission out to Vietnam to make a firsthand assessment, this one led by McNamara himself. General Taylor went along on that one and the State Department for that one designated Bill Sullivan as its representative because certainly McNamara and I think Taylor, too, had let it be known that they didn't like the views I was presenting at all. McNamara even said that he thought that my very sober presentation at that session in the White House without even a smile was something to be held against me. Well, I obviously was a bit nervous and I didn't think it was an occasion to be very smiley about, but that's when I began to realize that I had aroused anti-Mendenhall sentiments in very high quarters in Washington, particularly in the Defense Department.

LC: Joe, certainly your reference to being perhaps a little nervous and certainly exhausted, I would think as well, from the trip and all that was laid on your plate are quite understandable. I wonder if you can, though, thinking back about that meeting, say what it was like to walk into the National Security room and to make a presentation to the president. I mean, this was something you had not done before.

JM: That's right. I had never done this before and this, of course, was—I guess the word used today is "awesome," isn't it? I think I've heard that word used frequently these days. It certainly was, Laura. It's almost intimidating in a way for a person not in the top power category as almost all these persons gathered there were and particularly with the president himself presiding at the meeting whom I had never met before.

LC: Did you form just a physical impression of him, an impression of his physicality? Was he sitting in his famous chair, his rocking chair, or did he seem—

JM: No. He was not in a rocking chair. He was in quite a straight chair.

LC: The executive chair?

JM: I think all the chairs around that huge table which we were gathered were similar. There wasn't a bigger one for the president as there was when Diem had a formal dinner for Johnson when he visited in 1961, bigger chairs for those two than anybody else, but that was not true at the National Security Council meeting. Kennedy was, as I recall, in absolutely the same sort of chair as the rest of us. So one did not have any impression then of physical infirmity.

LC: How was he at running the meeting? Was he in control of the meeting or was—

JM: No. I would say that he was in control of the meeting, but I will say, Laura, the second National Security Council meeting I attended confirmed this. Kennedy, I don't think, was by and large a very decisive individual. He had trouble reaching decisions. Some may defend that on the grounds that it's better not to reach decisions quickly, but I think his experience in dealing with Khrushchev prior to the missile crisis and the bit I observed of him at these two National Security Council meetings indicate that he was not a strong individual in terms of reaching decisions. The second meeting, I'll just touch on it briefly, and we'll get into it a little more later, was toward the end of October about a week before the coup took place in Vietnam. So it was also a very key meeting. Kennedy was very indecisive at that meeting. Why don't I leave that meeting until we get to it, Laura?

LC: Okay.

JM: It reaffirmed my view that Kennedy was not a strong individual as president. I put it now rather bluntly, but Kennedy was almost totally style and not a great deal of substance except in the Cuban Missile Crisis, which he should never have permitted to happen in the first place.

LC: To what do you attribute that one off success in the Cuban Missile Crisis?

JM: I think his back was pushed absolutely to the wall then. That his presidency would be—as I indicated this was, I think, the greatest crisis since the Civil War. His presidency would be an utter failure unless he held to a strong position at that time. That I think he realized.

LC: So backed into a corner, essentially.

JM: Exactly, by Khrushchev.

LC: Well, Joe, this is of course a crucial meeting not only for you, but obviously for the development of policy although no decisions were taken. Certainly the fork in the road.

JM: This is September tenth.

LC: Yes, the fork in the road was certainly apparent. Do you remember any contributions or observations or anything else you can add about, for example, CIA Director McCone being there?

JM: I don't recall, but I don't recall, Laura, no. One would have to check the—that he made any significant intervention at that meeting if indeed any at all.

LC: In general, Joe, at this point, certainly the CIA had its own separate reporting lines as it always has had. Do you have a sense of what their position would have been? We've got Mendenhall and we know what his position was and we have Krulak and we know what he was going to say.

JM: Oh, yes. I can address that one, Laura, very easily. Bill Colby by that time was the head of Far Eastern Operations at the CIA and therefore the principal advisor to McCone on what was happening in Vietnam. Colby had been, was then, and remained a hundred-percent supporter of Diem and Nhu. So I think he probably influenced McCone in that direction. Although I don't think McCone was a strong vocal proponent of this position.

LC: To your knowledge, did Colby or any of the other people in the CIA reporting line waver on Nhu at all?

JM: No. We'll get to that again. Colby had been succeeded in Vietnam by John Richardson who held the same views as Colby did. We'll get to him, I guess the next time we talk, Laura, because that comes up. A very significant move with respect to Richardson came up in early October about a month later.

LC: Okay. Well, this famous meeting, it's a famous one not only because the president offered his witticism which many people have referred to, but also because it does begin the sort of the critical period moving toward what we found later to be the coup.

JM: Exactly.

LC: I wonder if there's anything additional that you can offer as an observation as a person who was in the room, as a person who walked away from that meeting that

afternoon. Did you go home and go to sleep or did you go back to the office?

JM: I think I probably did, Laura. Actually, it was a morning meeting, 10:00AM, not an afternoon meeting.

LC: I'm sorry. I beg your pardon.

JM: Right. As I say, no decisions came out of that meeting at all. Kennedy had a few days earlier made the public statement, which I mentioned, about policy and personnel but nothing—I don't think any statement was made to the press as a result of this meeting at all. I don't think any telegram went to Saigon as a result of it.

LC: Did you and Hilsman have a kind of wrap-up or review of where you were after your trip?

JM: Oh, I'm sure that I talked to him at great length about the trip. I can't recall now, Laura. Again, his views and mine on Vietnam at that stage were identical. They were not subsequently much later, but they were at that stage.

LC: You I'm sure then at that point felt fully supported then, fully backstopped as they say.

JM: Yes, backstopped by him and as well as by Harriman at that time. Again, I had very definite views contrary to theirs at later stages in the war.

LC: Then, of course, as you've said as it emerges Bundy was also supportive at least of your ability to say what it was you wanted to say.

JM: Right. That's McGeorge Bundy, not Bill.

LC: No, not Bill.

JM: He and his brother, Bill Bundy, were there. I don't think Bill Bundy opened his mouth at all during that session. I don't recall that he did.

LC: Okay. Well, Joe, let's leave it there for today.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [23] of [57]
Date: July 29, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-ninth of July 2005. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. The ambassador is speaking by telephone from Nevada. Joe, last time you gave us a full description of your important mission to Saigon and also your travels in-country to report to the president and also a description of the report that you made. I wonder if you can take us now to what you see as the next important set of developments.

Joseph Mendenhall: Well, the next important development was President Kennedy's decision to send another mission to Vietnam just about a month later, this one headed by McNamara, the secretary of defense, and General Taylor, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This one occurred, as I recall, during the first week in October. It came back with some interesting, although I think somewhat controversial recommendations. The one, which I tried to counter at the time, but without any success at all, was the recommendation that a public statement be issued that a thousand U.S. military could be withdrawn by the end of 1963, which was just three months later because of progress that had been made in preparing the South Vietnamese to handle the conflict themselves in South Vietnam. And that by 1965 we ought to be able to withdraw all of the remaining fifteen thousand Americans in Vietnam. At the time, and I've had no reason to change this view since, I've felt that this was a stab in the dark as far as the future was concerned. No one could predict whether that was going to be possible to withdraw the U.S. forces by the end of '65. Indeed it seemed to me very questionable to be suggesting that a thousand be withdrawn at the end of '63. To me this was, I think, one of the major steps in the decline in the credibility of the U.S. government assessments of the way the war was going in Vietnam. I think this never should have been done. As I say, I tried to oppose it, but without any success at all. The statement was made publicly and indeed a thousand were withdrawn at the end of the year, even though it was found that the situation was not only deteriorating since the coup that

replaced Diem with a military government at the end of October of '63, but also even McNamara himself concluded that our military and the Department of Defense had been misled by the Vietnamese under the Vietnamese government of President Diem much earlier about the alleged progress being made prior to the coup. But despite that the U.S. did proceed to withdraw the thousand. So to me that was a major political error on the part of the administration which contributed to the very serious deterioration in the credibility of the U.S. government as far as the war in Vietnam was concerned over the next few years. I might add, Laura, on that very point my view is that from the outset of the war until the great enemy Tet Offensive in 1968, the press assessments of the way the war was going in Vietnam were generally more reliable than the official position taken by the U.S. government and made public by the government. On the other hand, from the time of the Tet Offensive on in 1968 until the final defeat of the U.S. in 1975, the government, I think, was much more reliable than the press was. I think the press made a major contribution from 1968 on to the defeat of the U.S. in Vietnam. This is my broad assessment of reliability of the press versus reliability of the government as far as the Vietnam War was concerned.

LC: That's a very interesting one. Do you remember much about the press reaction to the public statement about the withdrawal plans that emerged from the McNamara-Taylor mission?

JM: Not specifically, Laura, but I think it was probably that this confirmed the press attacks that had already begun to develop about the credibility of many of the public positions taken by the U.S. government, particularly by the U.S. military and Department of Defense.

LC: Did the State Department argue the point?

JM: No. I didn't get any support even within the State Department on that. I think I was a lone, lonely fighter.

LC: A lone wolf.

JM: I didn't get very far at all.

LC: Certainly you would have discussed this, for example, with Hilsman.

JM: Yes, right.

LC: Where did the reluctance within the State Department to sort of contest this

point, where did the reluctance lie? Can you explain their argument?

JM: Well, I don't think that—

LC: It was going to happen anyway?

JM: I can't remember the specifics, Laura, but I don't think that I found any particular support within the department, either by Hilsman or by Bill Sullivan who was special assistant to Harriman at that stage and who had been a member of the McNamara-Taylor mission to Vietnam. I don't think I found any strong support among—I don't think they were willing to take a position in opposition to what I suppose could be argued in a sense that this was a military decision by the Department of Defense as to whether the war was going sufficiently well, it could withdraw forces of its own. I think the State Department didn't want to raise a further issue in sometimes already contentious relations between the State Department, certainly elements of it, and the Department of Defense, particularly because of the very difficult relationship between Hilsman as the assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs on the one hand, and McNamara and other members of the Department of Defense on the other hand, which had very serious consequences within a few months. This was already a very serious issue within the administration and became much more so as the months went on. So I think that also contributed to the fact that I had no success really in persuading anybody on this point. I make the point only because I think over time the position I took was borne out as being one that really should have been taken at the time. I also say, moving on, Laura, with respect to this McNamara-Taylor mission, the report which that mission made when it came back said that the political situation had indeed deteriorated within South Vietnam, which I felt was a vindication for the position I had taken a month earlier when I came back and made my report to the president and his National Security Council. Indeed, that mission recommended measures which were subsequently taken, in order to bring some real pressure on the Diem government to make some political changes. The more important of those measures was to suspend the Commercial Import Program financed by our AID agency which financed the commodities necessary to prevent price rises and inflation from developing within South Vietnam and thus keep the political situation as far as the populace was concerned under reasonable control. That was one of the recommendations. A second was to cut off support to the Special Forces, which were

under Ngo Dinh Nhu's direct control insofar as those forces were not committed to real elements of the war. In deciding upon these measures with respect to aid, everyone concerned in the U.S. government was very careful not to recommend suspension or cutting off any aid which might affect the direct progress of the war itself against the enemy. Both of these steps were taken within the next few weeks and brought some very real pressure on the situation in Vietnam, I think in terms of helping to encourage the generals who were beginning to seriously plot the coup which took place at the end of the month against President Diem. So there were very important consequences from these political recommendations made by the McNamara-Taylor mission as a result of its visit there and I think represented a reassessment on the part of the Defense Department as to how significant the political deterioration really was.

LC: There's a phrase that's often used now and that is the unintended consequences of a certain set of actions. Would you say that the set of developments that you've described where the generals who had been giving consideration to moving against President Diem were in some way encouraged by the suspension of the import aid program?

JM: Oh, yes, very definitely. I think they were.

LC: Was it intentional?

JM: This was the first real indication that the U.S.—and these measures very quickly became—the Vietnamese public very quickly became aware of them. I think these measures, which were the first real indication of concrete pressures rather than just words as far as the U.S., President Kennedy's administration's relationship with the Diem government was concerned, I think they had a real impact within Vietnam on the public and also on the generals.

LC: Was there intention, do you think, on the part of some in the Defense Department to push the generals using these means?

JM: No. I do not think so because I don't think the Defense Department at that point was really interested in encouraging a coup against Diem. I don't think General Harkins in Vietnam was and I don't think McNamara or Taylor were. All three of those were very firm supporters of Diem. I think their intention was to try to bring pressure on Diem to take some of the political steps that the U.S. had been urging on him. I don't

think their intention was to encourage the coup but I think, as you say, that was an unintended consequence of the recommendations that they made which were put into effect.

LC: Joe, this may stretch things slightly, but I wonder can you offer any insight into the operational relationship between the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense at this time?

JM: None other than I think what is pretty general knowledge. I've got to think this through. I'm not sure whether I'll be giving you correct information on the way the chain of command operated in the Department of Defense. The chain of command was from the president as commander-in-chief through the secretary of defense, I think through the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the military officers actually in command around the world. It may be that at particular stage the Joint Chiefs were not directly involved in the command chain. It may have passed directly from the secretary of defense to the commanders in the field because there was a big reform in the 1980s pushed by Senator Goldwater, which as I recall, put the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the chain of command. I wouldn't say, Laura, that what I am stating here is absolutely accurate. This is the way I remember that it operated, but I could be wrong.

LC: We'll make that an assignment for one of our future listeners to sort that out.

JM: Right. Exactly. I think that's the way it operated.

LC: Now, Joe, may I ask whether you put your thoughts about the wisdom or otherwise about the public announcement about the withdrawals? Did you ever put that into writing?

JM: I simply can't answer that question accurately. I may not have. It may have been done verbally within the department. There's certainly nothing in *Foreign Relations of the U.S.* which would reflect that I did put anything in writing, but that is not necessarily proof because I'll much later come up with an important document I did put in writing which did not appear in *Foreign Relations*.

LC: Okay. Well, we shall look forward to that. Can you tell roughly when so that I don't forget to ask you about it?

JM: The summer of 1964. So it's quite some way down the road. There's one other point—

LC: Yes, please.

JM: I would like to make with respect to the McNamara-Taylor mission. The reason that Kennedy decided to send this mission out so soon after the mission which Krulak and I had been on for him was, I think, the fact that Washington continued to get conflicting reports as to how the situation was going in Vietnam, not only differences of view among Americans, but differences among the Vietnamese. Interestingly, the same Vietnamese could express diametrically opposed assessments depending upon which American he was talking to and a very excellent example of that was Thuan, who was the number three in the Vietnamese government, the chief of staff to Diem and the minister of defense. Thuan told both Rufus Phillips and I think Bill Trueheart, the deputy chief and Rufus Phillips being the man in the AID mission who had about the longest experience in Vietnam of any American assigned to Vietnam at that point and was also in charge of the AID mission's operations in the provinces and therefore probably the civilian who was most acquainted with the way the situation was going in the provinces outside Saigon, and Trueheart who was the number two. Thuan expressed himself very pessimistically to both of those officials as to the way the situation was going in Vietnam and as to the political situation in Saigon and, in effect, the collapse of the government as far as any effective political role on the part of the government was concerned. When he spoke to General Harkins on the same subject, he didn't raise any of this and spoke to Harkins in the vein of business as usual as between the American military officials and the Department of Defense. Now there's a very important reason for that. The Vietnamese knew what the sentiments of the leading American officials in Vietnam was with respect to political events and the way the situation was going as to whether they were hundred-percent supporters of Diem or thought things should change. So for their own political and career skins they always phrased what they told Americans, frankly, depending upon whether they felt the person was reliable or not or whether they thought that that American might bring the views back to Diem and cause their careers to collapse and perhaps their lives to be put in jeopardy. I had had this experience myself when I was still in Vietnam, which I think I mentioned in one of our earlier sessions when I had the rare occasion of having a chance to talk to General Big Minh at a dinner given by the USOM director and preparing a report to Washington on the very dissident views that he

was expressing at this point. This was in either the fall of ’61 or early in ’62. I’ve forgotten which. Excuse me, Laura. When I sent this to the ambassador for approval to go to Washington he sent it over to General McGarr who was then the head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. McGarr said, “Oh, well Minh has never expressed this view to me at all.” Therefore because of this dichotomy between McGarr and myself, Ambassador Nolting killed my report and it never got to Washington. Well, at that point it was well known that McGarr was a hundred percent in favor of Diem. Minh would certainly not express the same views to him that he expressed to me. This is something that went on repeatedly among the Vietnamese, but was not understood in Washington by Kennedy, Rusk, or any of the top-level officials. They were always puzzled as to why you could get from leading American sources in Vietnam diametrically opposed reports as to what an important Vietnamese official was saying about the way things were going. You had to know the Vietnamese in order to be able to assess this and this had never gotten through. I think it was one of the reasons that Kennedy always appeared so puzzled as to the way things were going. As I indicated he said to Krulak and me after we made our reports, “Have you both been in the same country?” Well, it depends upon what Vietnamese you’re talking to and not only what Vietnamese, but what American the same Vietnamese may be talking to as to what views you get as to the way the situation’s going.

LC: It raises the larger point about intelligence and the processing of information and how effective American decision makers can be when they’re looking at information through their own prism rather than through the prism that actually produced the information. Certainly this has been at the center of some of the debate over the structuring and restructuring of the intelligence agencies.

JM: Restructuring won’t correct that problem, Laura, at all.

LC: You’re right. What would, Joe?

JM: Well, I think the only way I see of correcting it is by the upper level officials in our government in Washington recognizing that experience on the part of both themselves and particularly on the part of their subordinates in a particular country and indeed in service over many years in the Foreign Service—I’m talking about that particularly because that’s what I know—is something that can be extremely useful to

them and that those who stayed in Washington just don't know because they haven't had the experience. I'll give you, to me, a subsequent important example of that was the time of the Khomeini coup against the shah in Iran in 1979. Brzezinski was then the national security advisor to President Carter. He took the position that Ambassador Sullivan, who was then our ambassador in Iran, was not judging the situation right in Iran and that the Carter administration should send out an important American general to encourage the Iranian generals to move against Khomeini and his supporters in order to keep the shah in his position. That would better serve American interests. Well, Sullivan was reporting that there was no real chance of getting the Iranian generals to take this action on American recommendation and urging because if they felt there was any reasonable chance that the generals could move effectively against Khomeini and his supporters, they would certainly have taken it because it was their own lives that were at stake. Now somebody who's served in a country where a coup has taken place would have that feel, but Brzezinski and others in Washington didn't understand that because they hadn't had that kind of experience. They hadn't lived through coups and coup attempts. Indeed there was an excellent example of this also later in October of '63 in Vietnam when all the information we were getting from the generals in Vietnam was that they were moving rapidly to carry out a coup. At that minute President Kennedy and others in Washington, but particularly Kennedy, began to get cold feet because they were afraid that the coup would not be successful. As they put it, if it was tried and failed could undermine the whole U.S. position in Southeast Asia. You will see in *Foreign Relations of the U.S.* the telegram that went out to Lodge—telegrams I should say—that went out to Lodge on this point saying that, "You've got to get the generals' assessment and give us your assessment as to whether this coup is going to be successful or not. Otherwise we must discourage the generals from undertaking it." Well, Lodge came back and made essentially the same point I've made here. They're the best judges because their own lives are at stake. If it fails they're likely to forfeit their lives. I don't see how we can take any effective action to discourage them at this point. Well, Lodge made this report. Another cable went out drafted by McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security advisor. "We don't accept this position that the U.S. is powerless in these circumstances. You should still try to discourage the generals from proceeding if they're not certain

they're going to succeed at that time." By the time that cable got to Saigon, events had moved forward and it was too late for Lodge to take any action. I think he just filed that message. But this is further confirmation that experience—to me, now that I'm eighty-five, as I think I've said, Laura, before I know much more I think than I did when I was forty-five. There's nothing like experience in this world to help guide one through crises as they develop. The point I'm making now is that I think that more attention should be paid in Washington at higher levels to officials who will have had this kind of experience and less to those who are fairly new to responsible positions in government. That's the only message I got on that point, Laura.

LC: Mm-hmm. It sounds like an argument for making career Foreign Service officers into ambassadors. (Laughs)

JM: On that point, too, we can engage in a long discussion. There have been certain non-career ambassadors who have been extremely successful who have furnished excellent service to the U.S. government. There are others I could point to who were disasters, but one could also say that there are situations where career Foreign Service officers have not served the government well. Again, I have one in mind. This I hesitate to mention because I don't really know the circumstances, but I've long had the feeling that in the crisis over Kuwait in the summer of, what was that, 1990?

LC: 1989 or '90. Yes.

JM: Yeah. I think this, actually, the crisis began to develop, I think, in the summer of 1990. The Gulf War started in January of '91 I think.

LC: Yes. I think you're right.

JM: In that summer when we were trying to discourage Saddam Hussein from invading Kuwait, I think we probably had a mistake in having a career ambassador in Iraq, certainly a career woman, unless she had been Maggie Thatcher, which I don't think—

LC: No. I don't think she was. No.

JM: I've long had the feeling that in this particular case being a woman, unless she was a remarkable one, was simply not sufficiently strong in an Arab culture to dissuade Saddam Hussein from the position he was resolved to take. I'm not sure any career ambassador, or indeed a non-career ambassador could have, but I think somebody

who presented views much more strongly and forcefully might have had a greater chance of success than the lady did.

LC: Again, that speaks to the importance of understanding the culture with which you're dealing and rather than trying to impose one's external views on it work within the culture that you find you want to influence.

JM: I think there are certain countries and certain situations where it's probably not wise to have a lady ambassador even today. There are others where there's no problem at all, but I think there are certain ones where—one can't even make the blanket statement we shouldn't have a lady ambassador in any Muslim country. Look, there are Muslim countries that have had—look at Bangladesh. The two principal political figures in Bangladesh have for a long time been two women, right?

LC: And Pakistan as well.

JM: Pakistan also had Mrs. Bhutto as prime minister. So one can't say it across the—it depends, I think, upon the country itself, not just that it's Muslim but that country's history, and perhaps the situation that may be developing in that country.

LC: Of course the calculus also has to be driven by what is in the United States' best interests.

JM: That's right. I will hasten to add that there are a lot of male career officers who I don't think are forceful enough in presenting the views of the United States in a lot of situations. So this is just not to try to degrade women. It depends upon the individual, I think, in many cases more than the sex.

LC: But it does bring out an interesting point. Do you have much to offer us in the way of a characterization of President Kennedy's situation after he hears back from McNamara and Taylor?

JM: Yes. I'll do that, Laura, in just a moment. I do want to say that in the earlier part of October I was out of the situation in Washington for two weeks because I was sent to New York to assist the U.S. mission to the United Nations to deal with the Vietnam issue there. It was expected that a motion would come up of condemnation of the Diem government for religious repression pushed by several countries that are of Buddhist persuasion. There was also concern that Madame Nhu herself was going to appear in New York and would make an official statement to the general assembly which would

likely make the situation much worse than it was. All I can say, Laura, is that I consider those two weeks' temporary duty on my part in New York an utter waste of U.S. government money and my time because I didn't make any contribution at all. I found the mission made no effective use of my experience. Indeed the young man who was in charge of the Far East for that mission was, I found, a very arrogant, unsympathique individual who I think resented somebody coming from Washington. He certainly didn't try to make any use of me at all. Plus the fact that if the purpose in sending an individual like myself from Washington is to lobby with other countries' missions to the UN in New York, he's not likely to be terribly effective because he doesn't know the people and hasn't had the experience with them. Somebody who's in New York is much more likely to be useful in that connection because he knows the people involved. I consider that an utter waste of my time for two weeks. Then by, I suppose, the fifteenth or twentieth of October I was back in Washington. Then the next major development as far as I was concerned was the National Security Council meeting that was called by Kennedy around October twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth. Alexis Johnson, who was the number four official in the State Department and the leading Foreign Service officer in a high position in the State Department, called me and said he wanted me to go with him to that meeting. He also said to me, "Don't open your mouth there." That was just about the way he put it. That showed that the Department of State was being pushed very strongly by McNamara and Taylor about the support I'd shown for the anti-Diem movement for a long time. Particularly reporting from the special mission from the beginning of September to Vietnam, Johnson was the principal liaison between the department and the Department of Defense. I think he was an old personal friend of General Taylor's. So that indicated to me that, as I think I indicated the last time, I had alienated with my vigorous views on the latest situations developing in Vietnam, alienated McNamara and Taylor, people in very uppermost positions in the administration under Kennedy.

LC: Yet he called you and asked you to come along.

JM: Yeah. He wanted me to come along. I suppose just give some written advice by handing a note if my experience in Vietnam was needed at any point to assist in the discussions. I was never called upon, but it was very interesting to be told not to open my mouth at all.

LC: Well, before telling me about the meeting can you tell me something about Alexis Johnson as a person or in his career?

JM: He was certainly a long experienced, very able Foreign Service officer, very highly respected in the Service. He and Rusk, the Secretary of State, had known each other for a long time because in the early 1950s when Rusk was the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, Johnson was his principal deputy. So they had had long experience together. Rusk, of course, was out of government pretty much from the time the Republicans took over in '53 until the Democrats came back in in '61 in controlling the presidency, but they had had this experience together of course and knew each other very well and I think were reasonably close. Laura, I've been reading recently through *Foreign Relations of the U.S.* through that period and I was very interested in one sort of footnote development with respect to Johnson. This was in connection with the McNamara-Taylor mission which I've just been talking about, telephone discussion between Harriman and McGeorge Bundy.

LC: Are you looking at *FRUS* right now?

JM: No. I'm not looking at it right now, but I've been reading it recently and this struck me with respect to Alex Johnson. Harriman said that the man being discussed he didn't think would be a good representative for the State Department on that position because he didn't resist strongly Department of Defense positions. The footnote by the compilers of that volume said, "We don't know who this is," but it was clear to me from context or I guess something else I saw in *Foreign Relations* that Harriman had in mind Alex Johnson and Alex did not go on that mission. In fact, Harriman's assistant Bill Sullivan went, which I thought was an interesting bit of by-play among important figures of the administration and their views of other important officials. You get a number of these as you go through *Foreign Relations*. I remember another one occurring considerably later, I think in a telephone conversation between Lyndon Johnson as president and Fulbright as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Fulbright was deriding Harriman as being too old and out of it. So you've got all kinds of backbiting in these things. Human interests are, I guess, important in their way as affecting the way high figures in Washington view each other.

LC: Joe, have you bought yourself the *FRUS* for Vietnam, for all of the years that

are available?

JM: I have six volumes, from ’58 through ’64. So I do have those, yes.

LC: Do you ever buy other—have you decided to buy other volumes outside the Vietnam series?

JM: No, I never have, Laura. So I’m not really acquainted with any of the others.

LC: It certainly is a very interesting insight.

JM: Oh, it is. It is. There were lots of things in there that I wasn’t aware of, things that were handled very closely in top-level circles. So I learned a number of things myself and also, of course, kept my memory refreshed on a lot of developments.

LC: Absolutely. Well, they’re extremely detailed. The amount of material that the compilers were able to include is actually quite astounding, for the Vietnam volumes anyway.

JM: Laura, I would like to go back to this National Security Council meeting which occurred only two or three days before the coup in Vietnam. It was clear to me then that President Kennedy could not make up his mind as to whether he wanted to see a coup take place or not. For one thing, Bobby Kennedy was at that meeting, the attorney general. I remember his statement, “Remember the Bay of Pigs,” and I think this was to warn his brother better not to act at all than to take this action which may not succeed. I think that was the implication of his statement. He said this in a very dramatic fashion, “Remember the Bay of Pigs.” Kennedy couldn’t make up his mind and the cable that was drafted on the basis—and it was drafted by McGeorge Bundy to Lodge in Saigon—was a very wishy-washy one. The administration in Washington didn’t come down forcefully one way or the other. It was Lodge who—he, I think, could sense this indecision in Washington. He picked up the ball and certainly did nothing to discourage the generals from moving forward. As a matter of fact, told them that we would not attempt to thwart what they were trying to do.

LC: Can you tell me who else was attending the meeting? Do you remember, Joe?

JM: Well, it’s laid out in *Foreign Relations*. All of the principal officials in the White House and State and Defense were there, plus the attorney general, McCone from CIA. I don’t think Dillon from Treasury was at that meeting. I don’t recall. Anyway, he

wasn't playing any significant role at that stage.

LC: Did you sit around the exterior of the—

JM: Yes. I sat in the chairs on the outer edge, not in the inner part up to the table.

LC: What about Johnson? Was he with you?

JM: I think he probably sat up at the table, I believe. I think the department representatives were Rusk, Harriman, and Johnson. I don't think Ball was at that one.

LC: Can you tell us something about the flavor in the room? You've mentioned Kennedy's appearing to be indecisive. Was there heated exchange or was it—

JM: Well, there were certainly very definite differences of opinion and particularly again between the Defense Department and the State Department. Harriman, I think, was the strongest proponent of not attempting to dissuade the Vietnamese generals from undertaking a coup. Hilsman, I'm sure, was there, but I think Harriman, who was certainly of that view also. Rusk also somewhat tempered his hand, but I think he was more of the Harriman-Hilsman persuasion. Certainly the Department of Defense, McNamara and Taylor, they were on the other side of the fence on this issue. There was certainly strong discussion. I think it gets reflected in the record in *Foreign Relations*.

LC: How did the president seem to you? Did he seem well?

JM: Yes. I never saw any indication of physical handicap on his part. I know what has been said subsequently, but I did not see any indication of that. He always seemed to participate in these, but he did have great trouble making up his mind and nowhere more prominently in my brief experience with him than at this meeting.

LC: Was the vice president there?

JM: No. He was not.

LC: Okay.

JM: I don't think—I'm pretty sure he—

LC: We can check. We can certainly check.

JM: I'm not sure, but I don't think so.

LC: You don't have a memory of him there.

JM: No. I do not.

LC: Had you met the vice president at this point?

JM: Yes, in Vietnam two years earlier.

LC: Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, of course. Other than that visit that he made?

JM: No. I had had no subsequent experience with him. I will mention something that I was going to mention later with respect to the vice president. I think this was in the summer of '63, which was a few weeks or a couple of months earlier than this. Nonie suddenly got a call at home, Nonie my wife, saying that Mrs. Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson, wanted to invite Nonie for tea to the vice president's house, the one on the hill in, I guess, the ex-naval observatory.

LC: Observatory. Mm-hmm.

JM: Yeah. This call came from I think Liz Carpenter, who was Lady Bird Johnson's secretary. Nonie's response was, "Well, I'll have to see because I don't know whether I can get a babysitter or not." I think there was very little notice on this. I guess the call didn't come from Liz Carpenter. It came from somebody else in the vice president's house. Nonie immediately telephoned me—I was at work in the department—to tell me about this. I laughed and I said, "Look, you're being invited by the vice president's wife. You go. If you can't get a babysitter I'll come home and babysit myself." So Nonie called back and accepted. It was probably an invitation for the same day, I suspect. So Nonie went to this session and when she arrived at the vice president's office Liz Carpenter walked out and said, "Oh, I want to see this woman who said that she didn't know whether she could accept or not depending upon whether she could get a babysitter." Well, it turned out to be pretty much a tête-à-tête tea with Lady Bird, between Lady Bird and Nonie. The principal reason was, I think, I know was because Nonie had arranged the tea when Lady Bird Johnson came as the vice president's wife to Vietnam in May of 1961 at which Madame Nhu was present. I think this was sort of Lady Bird's very gracious way of saying thank you to Nonie for arranging that. Nothing significant in any political sense, but it was interesting that it occurred socially.

LC: Very interesting. How did Nonie find Mrs. Johnson?

JM: She was always a lady, always extremely pleasant both in Saigon and at this tea with Nonie, very easy to get along with, easy to talk to.

LC: Joe, let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [24] of [57]
Date: August 12, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twelfth of August 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech. As usual, the ambassador is speaking to me by telephone from Nevada. Good morning again, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: We had spoken last about your recollections of the National Security Council meetings on, I think, the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth of October 1963. Of course, the events of the next week or so were crucial for you as Vietnamese relations. Joe, I wonder if you can just recount for us what you remember about those days.

JM: As you indicated, we discussed the National Security Council meeting, a National Security Council meeting which, as I recall, took place just two or three days before the coup. I think it took place maybe on a Monday and the coup, I believe, was on a Wednesday. I wouldn't swear to those days of the week. At that National Security Council meeting it was clear that President Kennedy couldn't quite make up his mind as to whether the U.S. should be supporting the coup or not. The telegram that went out to Ambassador Lodge indicated that Washington wanted to know whether the Vietnamese military actually had lined up sufficient military units behind them to ensure the success of the coup and said if they had not then they should cease and desist because if they tried to mount a coup and it failed the whole U.S. position in Southeast Asia might be undermined. Actually, I think that cable reached Ambassador Lodge when events were beginning to unfold in Vietnam with respect to the coup which Lodge knew he could not control. The trouble, I think, in Washington in this instance, and I think I've mentioned before in other instances of coups and coup attempts abroad, is that the people usually although not always but usually armed forces personnel because they are the ones who command the power to upset an incumbent government. The people who are leading the coup attempt are the ones who are most concerned as to whether it's going to succeed or not because in most cases their lives are at stake. If the coup fails their lives may be forfeited because they will be found guilty of treason to the government they were trying

to upset.

LC: Certainly.

JM: In the last analysis it's they who I think have to decide whether they've lined up sufficient support in order to carry out what they're proposing to do successfully. I don't think that was as really well understood in Washington and should be. That is perhaps the most fundamental factor with respect to whether a coup is going to succeed or not. Not all do, of course. Sometimes there can be misjudgment, but they're the ones in the best position to determine it because their own fate is involved. In any case, the cable went out from Washington which was, I think, wishy-washy because minds could not be made up at the top level in Washington as to whether the coup should proceed or not did not really influence the events in Vietnam. The generals who were mounting the coup wanted to be sure of only two things with respect to the U.S. government. One, that we would not intervene with armed force to try to thwart the coup and the answer there was no we would not. Second, if the coup was successful would we maintain our assistance and support of the Vietnamese government and there the answer was yes. In a sense those were indirect encouragements, but we did not ourselves, despite what some historians would have alleged, we did not ourselves actually directly encourage the coup. It was neither of our instigation nor of our planning and development. It was the generals themselves who decided to proceed with it only after they were convinced in their own minds that they had sufficient support among the other generals and particularly the ones commanding troops in the Saigon area to have a good chance of success.

LC: Joe, can I stop you just there for a moment to ask what you believe were the key factors in setting the timing, the framework within—you've established the framework, but what about the timing that the generals chose to move? Do you have a theory?

JM: I think the single biggest factor in that, Laura, was the position of General Dinh, D-I-N-H, because he was the one who had under his direct command the largest number of troops in the Saigon area. He was the one whom the other generals were least certain of. They were not sure whether he wouldn't throw in his lot with Diem rather than with them. They succeeded in the end in either bringing him around to full support or sufficiently neutralizing him that they felt they could proceed. I think he probably

threw in his lot with them because he was later for a while part of the successor government after Diem was overthrown. I think that was the biggest single factor. They wanted—the generals who were the leaders of the coup planning felt they had to be absolutely sure that Dinh would not throw in his lot with the government, particularly as I say, since he had the largest number of troops in the Saigon area.

LC: Okay. Thanks. That helps because this is sort of a missing piece, I think, in a lot of historians' treatments. They can comb through *FRUS* and they can refer to other materials on the American side, but we have less information obviously about the dynamics on the Vietnamese side, both within the government and amongst the coup plotters.

JM: Laura, I think supporting the point I just made, I think the position of Dinh was the key factor was the fact that two months earlier when it was felt in Saigon and Washington that the generals might mount a coup and did not and Lodge came on back, "I don't think we can count on the generals. They're really mush." I think they assessed then that they were not sure that they had sufficient support. So I think the same factors that were at play when the successful coup was mounted at the end of October were in evidence during the consideration of a coup in August a couple of months earlier.

LC: I see. Well, Joe, please continue with your own recollections of this time.

JM: Well, since it was known in Washington on the basis of reporting from Saigon that a coup attempt was quite possible, the authorities in the State Department had mounted a twenty-four hour watch in the operation center, the crisis center of the State Department all through the night as well as during the day to follow the reporting from Saigon on a minute-to-minute basis so that the U.S. government top level officials could be kept abreast. It so happened by chance that I was the officer in the crisis center when the coup took place. I saw the first flash cables that came in from the field reporting that the coup had started and was in progress. I telephoned in the State Department Secretary Rusk, Harriman who was the number three in the State Department and Hilsman who was the assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. I also telephoned McNamara, the secretary of defense, and McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor and told them about the fact that the news had been flashed in. I asked McGeorge Bundy, "Do you want me to call President Kennedy," and the answer was, "No. I'll take care of that."

LC: Well, those are still—although you did not speak to the president that day—can you, if you remember anything, Joe, tell me about the immediate reactions or what you gleaned from these quick conversations? I'm sure they were relatively brief.

JM: Well, they were not surprised that a coup had started, but they were obviously deeply interested that it had. Since nobody knew at the beginning stage how it was going to come out they reserved any judgment on the coup attempt until they saw the results of it. It became clear during the day that followed that night that the coup had been successful. Then a thunderbolt struck at the end of that day when news came in that Diem and Nhu had been assassinated. That was an immense surprise, a real blow to everybody from President Kennedy down. He was stunned and I think everybody in Washington was because we knew that the coup had been successful, we knew that Diem and Nhu were out of the presidential palace in Saigon. I don't think they were actually in the presidential palace. It had been damaged in an airplane bombing about a year-and-a-half earlier. I think they were actually in Gia Long Palace as the headquarters of the government which had been used when Vice President Johnson had visited as the government guesthouse. I think they escaped from there. As it turned out, they got into Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon, through a previous arrangement with, I believe, a Chinese businessman and were found after some hours by the coup leaders in a church there. One of the generals picked them up at that church and started driving them back into central Saigon from the Chinese section into central Saigon. It was he who killed them actually on the way back. Of course, there's been an immense debate over the years as to whether he was carrying out orders from the generals leading the coup or whether this was an initiative on his own part. I don't know whether anybody will ever find the definitive answer to that one. So I think I'll just leave that one open, Laura.

LC: Sure. That's fine. Joe, going back to the time when those first flash cables were coming in to the operations center, first of all, can you tell me where in the State Department building the operations center is?

JM: It was located on the seventh floor, which is the floor in which the offices of the secretary of state are located. Top level officials sometimes drop in for the latest news. I can even remember during 1964 when there were conference calls between top-level officials in the State Department and the top people in our embassy in Saigon. The

secretary of state and others would sit down and talk to these people, to the officials in Saigon directly from the operations center. So it was very close to the secretary of state's office.

LC: Is the secretary's principal office on the eighth floor or is there an eighth floor? I can't remember.

JM: No. I think it's on the seventh floor. The eighth floor is the one where the diplomatic reception rooms are located.

LC: The ceremonial rooms, yes.

JM: Yes, a very elegant area because it was furnished over the years with many American antiques and I think has become over the years one of the finest reception areas in America and I think in the world. Incidentally, as I'll say a little later, it's where President Johnson, after Kennedy's assassination, held a reception receiving heads of state and government who were attending the funeral.

LC: Oh, okay. I did not realize that. The atmosphere in the operations room on the evening and the night that the cables were coming in, did you happen to be there? Were you essentially on watch?

JM: No. I was the watch officer that night. I had been designated as the watch officer that night, but it was by sheer chance that that was the night that the coup began.

LC: Who else was there? Do you remember, Joe?

JM: No. I do not. I'm not sure there were that many people concerned with Vietnam because the watch officer was the one who was to stay awake all night and notify anybody else who should be notified or should be needed to be at work there.

LC: You were it.

JM: There may have been some other people who worked on Vietnam, but I don't recall, Laura.

LC: Okay. Let me just ask about essentially the protocol. You were completely empowered to ring the secretary of state, for example?

JM: I had their home telephone numbers. This was in the middle of the night. I think the flash news came in between 1:00 and 2:00AM. So I had the home telephone numbers of all these people and rang them at home and, of course, awakened all of them from their sound sleep.

LC: I'm sure. Did any of them come into the office?

JM: I don't recall that any of them came in right away because nobody could be sure how rapidly developments were going to occur. I think they left it to me that if any key developments occurred to call them again. I didn't call anybody again during the night because we were simply waiting to see how the coup attempt unfolded.

LC: Would Secretary of Defense McNamara have recognized your name, Joe?

JM: Oh, yes. He already had it in for me because of our differences over the Diem government. So yes, I know he must have recognized me.

LC: So you called and said, "Mr. Secretary, this is Joseph Mendenhall."

JM: Oh, yeah. I said who it was and I said that I was on duty in the operations center and the coup was underway, which as I say didn't surprise anybody, but nobody knew what the timing would be or whether indeed it would in fact come off. You never know until the thing starts.

LC: For sure that's right. How much traffic was coming in from Saigon?

JM: Laura, judging from the *U.S. Foreign Relations*, the official volume, obviously quite a number of flash messages came in from the various agencies of U.S. government in Saigon. I think we undoubtedly got all of them in the operations center that night that pertained to the coup.

LC: Did you get off duty and trade your watch in to be relieved by someone else in the morning?

JM: Obviously at some point and I can't remember actually when, Laura. I don't know whether I was there all night until morning. I probably was, but I'm not sure. But I probably stayed home at least for a while during that day to catch up on some sleep.

LC: I'm sure.

JM: I know the following evening Nonie and I were giving a dinner party at our house. We obviously had scheduled it much earlier with several guests. It was while the guests were there that I got a telephone call from the State Department about the assassination of Diem and Nhu. That's where I picked up that news. I was stunned at the time just as I've indicated all the top officials in the U.S. government were from Kennedy down. Laura, officially everybody rued the fact that this took place, first because of the fact that it meant loss of life, and second because it could have affected the political

support within the U.S. for the successful coup government in Vietnam. On reflection, and this is simply my private view, the fact that Diem and Nhu were eliminated was probably, from the standpoint of Vietnamese political affairs, not an unfortunate development because had they lived they would have constantly plotted to return to Vietnam. As it turned out, of course, there was enough chaos over the succeeding months and years, up to two years in Vietnam without their hand, and particularly Nhu's plotting hand in it, which if they had lived there would have been just that much more of a chaotic situation in Vietnam. Laura, I have just been re-reading Lord Kinross's *The Ottoman Centuries* and just last night I was reading as to when the Ottoman sultans adopted the policy of eliminating, that is murdering, all their younger brothers once they were named the sultan. Because of the long record of the fact that when there are younger brothers of an existing ruler the chances of civil war and instability are much greater than if they're eliminated. Now, I know that this is something that is held very strongly in the West against the Ottoman government, but from the standpoint of political stability there's probably an argument for it. I don't think this was a completely new device as far as rulers in Constantinople were concerned. I think it had been employed at times by Byzantine emperors who ruled there prior to the Ottomans. So the situation there is rather analogous to the situation that I've just described with respect to Vietnam had Diem and Nhu continued to live and plot and further destabilize the political situation in South Vietnam.

LC: It certainly would have been a wild card for as long as they both lived.

JM: I can say this forty years later, but of course I never stated this officially in any way at the time. It would not have been a popular view either within the government or with the American public. It is a certainly coldly geopolitical realistic approach to situations that can develop in countries, which Americans are not too inclined to do. I feel, for example, that we should never take our nuclear option off the table in any crisis situation. I'm not saying we should use it, but don't take it off the table because that's one of the key deterrents we have. Just as it saved a lot of lives when the two nuclear bombs were dropped on Japan in 1945, the mere existence of the nuclear option can save American lives today and in the future.

LC: And probably has.

JM: That's also somewhat analogous, I think.

LC: And probably has. I think we know it has on at least a couple of occasions that you and I have already discussed and will discuss.

JM: The fact that it was taken off the table, I think, for example in the Vietnam War—I think one of the cases where it was extremely—that you were just mentioning, Laura, probably the foremost case where it was extremely useful was to end the Korean War. When Eisenhower was elected president in '52, he let drop some hint about the existence and possible usefulness of our nuclear capability in ending that war. I think it helped to bring the Chinese to the negotiating table, the Chinese and North Koreans to the negotiating table. So never close the door. I remember, I think, at Fulbright's insistence I think in the late '60s I can't remember whether the Johnson administration—I think they actually took it off the table. I think that was a terrible mistake in the Vietnam War.

LC: That they made a public pronouncement about that, yeah.

JM: I think so. I'm not absolutely sure though, Laura, but I know Fulbright was pushing for it.

LC: Well, it's certainly something that has immediate implications in our current situation when we look at Iran and Korea and so on.

JM: Absolutely. For example, North Korea now is saying that we must give up our nuclear guarantee, the use of our nuclear deterrent with respect to both Japan and South Korea. I can see no circumstances under which we would announce that we're giving up the nuclear deterrent as far as those two countries are concerned.

LC: No circumstances in which that would be an advantageous thing to say.

JM: Exactly. It's an issue even today as you say.

LC: Yes. *Realpolitik* is not something with which everyone is comfortable.

JM: I know.

LC: But I suppose you would agree with me that thank God those people aren't the ones who are making the decisions.

JM: Right. Well, Machiavelli's *The Prince* still has some validity in geopolitical situations even today.

LC: That's right. Well, your mention of the policy of the sultanate to eliminate possible contenders to the throne immediately to the seat of power actually brings me to

wonder what you thought at the time or have thought subsequently about the other members of the Ngo family. Particularly I'm thinking of Ngo Dinh Can who was up in Hue when the coup took place.

JM: Well, he was actually brought to trial and found guilty at the trial of a lot of nefarious activities prior to the coup and sentenced to death on the basis of those.

LC: Did that all seem a relatively, well, I won't say fair, but controlled process, the trial?

JM: Certainly the fact that he was found guilty at the trial and the death sentence was carried out certainly did not arouse any furor in the United States. I don't think it created much of a ripple. I don't recall that it did and I was working on Vietnam affairs at the time.

LC: Back to the actual days of coup, certainly one of the concerns, I would guess, when it was learned that the president and Ngo Dinh Nhu had been killed was the possibility that there might be broader violence against people with whom they had been associated. Did you see any reports or sense the potential for some wider political violence against, for example, Catholics?

JM: I think that was a concern in Washington, but I don't think there was ever any reporting from the field that indicated that this was a real danger. It's not something that could be totally dismissed as a possibility, but I don't recall that there was every any reporting that indicated that this was likely in anyway.

LC: Some authors have referred to the events of the coup and flashed back to the outline for a potential overthrow of Diem that you yourself had penned months earlier and said that everything went off like clockwork. I think one author said, "Mendenhall's blueprint had been carried out to the letter."

JM: Oh, really? I never saw that.

LC: I'll Xerox that and send it to you.

JM: Oh, yeah. That was probably derived from that memo I prepared for Harriman in 1962.

LC: Yes. Did you have any sense, Joe, that your analyses had paved part of the way for a change of government? Now I'm not talking about the assassinations, but for a change of government that would be better for South Vietnamese and better for what the

United States was trying to accomplish there?

JM: No, Laura, because that memo was highly classified, though it is now known on the basis of its appearance in *U.S. Foreign Relations*, I don't think there was any knowledge of it in Vietnam or in the U.S. outside of the narrow circle probably in the State Department.

LC: Rather your own feelings about it. Did you feel essentially that your case that you had been developing ever since 1960 that Diem really was an immovable object and needed to go?

JM: Yes. I had reached this firm conclusion by late 1960 and certainly was reinforced in '61 and '62 that no matter what position we took we couldn't really budge Diem politically. We were not going to be able to win the war with him and Nhu because of the inefficiencies, both the lack of popularity of his government and particularly the inefficiencies as a governmental mechanism because to deal with a guerilla war you need to have an effective government applying the proper policies and rapid intervention when a terrorist incident takes place. That certainly wasn't true on the part of the Diem-Nhu operation. So I felt we could not win the war without something of increased effectiveness within South Vietnam.

LC: Did it look to you in the early days after the coup that the group of generals were going to be able to put together that more cohesive system, more substantial group?

JM: Laura, I felt at that time as I had earlier, that the South Vietnamese simply did not have in their government a system organized for maximum government efficiency and effectiveness. I felt that we should take advantage of the new receptiveness of this government to try to introduce into that government Americans in key positions, not just as advisors, but seconded to the government and working in government administrations. This is something which the United States had never done before and was completely alien to our concept of working with a foreign government, but it is something that the French did. They obviously didn't exist in Vietnam at that point because Diem had chased the French pretty effectively out of the country in as far as officially advising and assisting the government was concerned in 1954. But I found in Laos when I served there later that there were Frenchmen actually seconded to that government sitting day by day in Lao ministries behind the scenes operating as fully qualified and accepted officials

of Lao ministries. I think the French did the same thing in Africa after a number of their dependencies reached independence. It's not something that we ever did until CORDS, which was the pacification agency organized in 1967, finally did at province and district level where we had Americans really working in that way with Vietnamese officials at that level. I don't think we ever did it with the central government, even under CORDS, but we certainly did it after '67. They proved to be extremely effective in eventually winning the guerilla war in South Vietnam, which we'll get to later. Now I think the first step after the coup in Vietnam, taken by President Kennedy was, I felt at the time, a mistake, but nobody was really consulting me on it. I think McCone, the head of CIA, pushed Kennedy to send somebody out to Vietnam within a few days after the coup, to send an official representative of our government to assess the situation and how it was likely to operate under the new government. The man chosen to go out was Bill Colby. Now Bill was an extremely capable individual, but he was well known in Vietnam as a hundred-percent supporter of Diem and Nhu. To have him go out and try to assess with the new government how it would operate and what it was receptive to, I felt he was simply not the right person. It should have been somebody who was more sympathetic to what had taken place and whom the generals knew had looked upon what they were doing with favor, but that was not the way it worked.

LC: Can you tell me anything about the mission, the findings, the results of Colby's tour? Was it a brief visit? I seem to think it was.

JM: I think it was very brief. I don't think it turned out to have a great deal of significance at that point. Since I think that mission took place within a week or so after the coup, I don't think any very definitive conclusions were reached by Colby and his mission out there. I'll also add, Laura, that the idea that I've just outlined of inserting American officials right into Vietnamese ministries to work effectively day by day with them in decisions and implementing decisions, I don't think would have ever been acceptable to Lodge as the ambassador. I'll make another judgment for you. Lodge was, I think, an extremely effective ambassador because of his personality and his patrician approach, aloofness and approach, during the two or three months leading up to the coup. We couldn't have had a more effective ambassador to pursue the policy that we did with respect to Diem and Nhu. But once the coup took place his aloofness, his lack of

propensity for getting deeply involved with the government to which he was accredited was I think the wrong approach. I think we should have had an ambassador who was willing to get very close to them and work extremely closely to a degree in the sense I've just outlined. I don't think Lodge was the right man for the position after that time. It's extremely interesting.

LC: How problematical would it have been for the president to pull the ambassador right after the coup?

JM: I think it probably could not have been done in a political sense. You know, it's interesting if I sit back and look at my assessment of various officials in our government with whom at times I was one hundred percent in agreement and later was not. Same way with respect to Harriman. I agreed with and supported Harriman completely up to the time—well, agreed with—as far as getting rid of Diem was concerned, I did not support Harriman at all on the outcome of the Geneva Conference on Laos because that agreement was never respected by North Vietnam. One's judgment of the policies and performance of particular high-level individuals can easily change as circumstances change. To me it's a sort of interesting human factor in the way governments operate.

LC: What was Harriman's own feeling about—if you know—reaction to the coup events and the emergence of a new group?

JM: I think he was very pleased because he had been the leading proponent in the State Department, supported by Hilsman, of the desirability of getting rid of Nhu. Since Diem would not get rid of Nhu therefore getting rid of Diem as well. I think he was very pleased.

LC: He was pleased with the exit of the Ngo brothers.

JM: The only government in prospect at the moment was the one by the generals with previous Vice President Tho under Diem acting as the prime minister.

LC: Okay. So the sense was that a military government essentially having come into place was a stabilizing factor, the only available option.

JM: I think the official view in Washington that it was desirable to follow, as it usually is, constitutional processes to the extent that they can be. Since Tho had been vice president and Diem had been eliminated as president the next logical constitutional

move was to move Vice President Tho up in to the charge of the operation of the government. In this case he was placed in charge, but more or less nominally with the military council, particularly the three generals who had led the coup, Generals Minh, Don, and Kim, as the really more important political factors in the situation because that's where the power really lay.

LC: Right. Let me ask about the reaction in Congress particularly. I know that you would have had at least some glancing knowledge, I'm sure, of what reactions were taking place in the Senate for example. Can you tell me—I believe Rusk and Hilsman went up to the Hill within a few days, like the fourth or fifth of November, to testify about the coup, to give some kind of a briefing to the senators. Do you remember anything about that?

JM: Not specifically, Laura, but I think that most members of Congress who had been appalled over what had developed over the summer of '63 under Diem and Nhu in Vietnam, the burning of the Buddhists in the streets by self-immolation and the fact that that could be in any way identified with the United States because of our general support of that government, I think they felt was an extremely unfortunate situation which placed the U.S.—so I think the immediate reaction by and large was that the members of Congress were pleased with what had taken place. As time went on, the views of some changed. I can remember for example Congressman Zablocki of Wisconsin who may have been at that time or became shortly thereafter the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the House—I guess it's called the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House.

LC: Yes. Mm-hmm.

JM: Ruing very much in a conversation I had with him at a party the fact that Diem had been overthrown. I think that became the position of a number of members of Congress at a later stage. That's hindsight.

LC: I think he was at the time of these events the chair of the Sub-Committee on the Far East.

JM: Oh, I think that was it. I think—didn't he become chairman of the committee?

LC: Later on, yeah. Mm-hmm. But he did have a particular interest obviously in Asian affairs. I think you're right. He had certainly asked some questions about

American complicity in the coup.

JM: Yeah. I can remember, Laura, also in 1969, and that of course was six years later, when I was testifying again before the House of Foreign Affairs Committee in defense of the appropriation for the AID program in Vietnam when a congressman from North Carolina strongly attacked the fact that we had supported the U.S. government or as he put it had support of the overthrow of Diem. So that feeling certainly did develop in, I think, fairly wide areas as the years went on.

LC: Joe, let me ask you a question that has to do with contemporary views of President Diem. I think I've mentioned to you before that there's a movement afoot in American scholarship amongst American historians to in effect rehabilitate President Diem's reputation and to cast the United States and U.S. policymakers and particularly State Department officials as the nefarious influence that undermined a Third World leader who had the potential to in fact work well within the confines of his own government and his own culture to stop communism. This is a movement that's growing and that has many new adherents. A number of books are being published to resurrect Diem's reputation and to turn a lot of what has served as scholarly interpretation in the past on its head. I have a feeling I know—

JM: Revisionist history, Laura.

LC: That's exactly right. I have a feeling I know how you'll respond, but I would like to have your take at this point, with all the thoughts that you've given to this as well as the experiences that you had both in Vietnam and Washington, to whether you think this is in any way a profitable area for scholars to work in.

JM: Laura, my response to the scholars who are beginning to take this position strongly as you've indicated, which I was not aware of and I'm quite interested in the fact that this is developing, my recommendation to them would be to look at the statements, assessments by Secretary of Defense McNamara in the months succeeding the coup as to what the actual security situation was in South Vietnam in the months and years preceding the coup. The Department of Defense at the top civilian level as well as the top military level had taken the position—this was true when I went on my special mission with Krulak in September of '63 and Krulak took this position—that everything was going very, very well in a military sense despite the political chaos in Saigon at that

point and that the situation was steadily improving militarily. You'll also remember that in October of '63 when McNamara came back from one of his special missions to Vietnam on behalf of Kennedy that he issued a public statement saying, "We can withdraw a thousand American military personnel at the end of '63 because the situation is going so well. It looks as though we'll be able to withdraw all our people by the end of '65." In the months succeeding the coup even McNamara acknowledged that this rosy assessment had been based on the statistics furnished to the American military by the Diem government and that they had quite falsely portrayed the situation. McNamara, at times, indicated that the situation had started to deteriorate in July of '63. I think at other times he acknowledged that even earlier the security situation had not been nearly as good as he and the leading American military had thought that it was. So I would recommend that they look—again, you can get a lot of this in *Foreign Relations*. That you look at that for refutation of this revisionist position being taken by American scholars.

LC: That's very interesting. Well, Joe, let's leave it there for today.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [25] of [57]
Date: August 19, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive, continuing the oral history interview with Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the nineteenth of August 2005. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking by telephone from Nevada. Joe, we're picking up our consideration of the events immediately following the coup in Saigon in 1963. I wanted to ask a little bit about third-country reactions, our allies, but other Southeast Asian countries, too, to the events in Saigon and what you might recall about that.

Joseph Mendenhall: Well, Laura, as far as the UK was concerned I think they were on the Conservative government then in power and the UK was on the same wavelength that we were with respect to Vietnam. It was not very actively involved in Vietnam except for the Robert Thompson mission that was there and continued for quite some time afterwards. The principal third-country reaction was from de Gaulle who of course produced something that was not helpful at all because he put forth his proposal for neutralization of Vietnam which was absolutely ridiculous because North Vietnam was not about to be neutralized and South Vietnam certainly couldn't be neutralized alone, but was on the immediate path to takeover. It was like proposal in the mid-'50s on the part of some people including George Kennan and the Social Democrats in Germany about neutralization of Germany, which would immediately have provided an avenue for Soviet influence to have become predominant in Germany. In both cases the proposals that were put forth were certainly deeply contrary to U.S. interests in those two countries. As far as Southeast Asian countries are concerned, or I should say Asian I suppose, there was no great reaction on the part of any. The people most interested, I think, were the Thai who I don't think reacted strongly one way or the other. I don't think they disapproved of what had happened. I think they were interested in any action taken in Vietnam which could strengthen the anti-communist cause. The other Southeast Asian country which I think followed events was Laos under the neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma. Well, I should say the three—actually it was tripartite government with Souvanna Phouma as the neutralist prime minister who

was never very close to either the Diem regime or the subsequent regimes in South Vietnam. There was no particularly influential reaction on the part of any of the Asian countries, [except for a quite substantial troop contribution by South Korea].

LC: Anything that you recall about Sihanouk's reaction?

JM: I think Sihanouk continued to be as anti-South Vietnamese as possible. I suppose that his basic assessment was that the communists were ahead and he wanted to be sure that he was on the winning side. Our relations with Sihanouk were certainly anything but close at that point. They were getting close to the breaking point with his threat to move completely into the communist sphere by allying himself with Communist China.

LC: Joe, let me go back to France just for a moment. What do you think de Gaulle actually had in mind in making the proposal that he did? Was it to get a foot back in the water in terms of the outcomes in Indochina or did he have some other reason, domestic or—

JM: I think there were probably several motivations there in Indochina. The French were always jealous of the fact that we had displaced their predominant influence in Vietnam and certainly subsequently did so in Laos. Therefore it's somewhat similar to the French reaction today. French reactions haven't changed that much. A lot of the French political positions in international affairs certainly involving U.S. interests, I think taken particularly out of pique and jealousy. The French have always resented the fact that we are the predominant superpower and they don't have the influence that they once had. Plus the fact that I think de Gaulle was searching for something that he thought might be an alternative to what I think he probably genuinely felt was not likely to be a successful policy on our part given the fact the French had failed, He came up with the only idea that he could. Then when it was pursued in discussions with him by our ambassador in France, Chip Bohlen, it turned out that he didn't really have any idea as to how this policy proposal was to be implemented in any successful way. It was something he put forward for propaganda purposes. Then, of course, at the same time that de Gaulle put forth this neutralist position the *New York Times* began to adopt a similar editorial approach, as you will remember.

LC: Joe, how important was that? Certainly there are many stories about

President Kennedy reading the *New York Times* every morning and being concerned about those reports. How influential was the newspaper at that time?

JM: Well, I don't think it was influential as far as Washington was concerned but it aroused in South Vietnam, particularly in the successor government and in many South Vietnamese circles, concern that these two prominent sources of neutralism, de Gaulle on the one hand and the *New York Times* on the other, might be a foreboding harbinger of the policy that the U.S. government might pursue. In that respect, these developments were very significant because they did tend to undermine South Vietnamese morale at that stage. We had to keep reassuring the South Vietnamese that the U.S. policy was unchanged, that we were resolved to support the independence of South Vietnam.

LC: Going back to the days immediately following the coup and the news of the assassination of Diem and Nhu, of course, the United States immediately recognized the new government. Is that correct?

JM: Almost immediately. We decided to wait briefly to permit a few other countries to do it so as not to paint the picture that the new South Vietnamese government was a puppet under our control, but we came through relatively soon on the recognition. That was the only factor that tended to deter it briefly.

LC: Do you remember which countries we allowed to queue up in advance?

JM: No. I don't remember specifically now which ones did, Laura.

LC: Was there a decision taken soon thereafter to restore some of the, I believe, price support assistance?

JM: Oh, yes. I think our aid programs were fully restored. We had indicated to the generals when they asked us before proceeding with the coup whether we would continue to provide the kind of aid that we had been furnishing Vietnam. We had assured them that we would and we did. The programs that had been cut off or reduced in October to put pressure on the Diem regime were very quickly restored.

LC: Okay. Let me ask about the impact of the change of government on the internal security situation in South Vietnam. What appraisals, if any, do you recall being made as to the impact on, for example, the NLF?

JM: Well, as the weeks wore on there were increasing reports that because of the

concentration of this new government on one, political matters and two, replacing province chiefs, that the South Vietnamese were not being as aggressive as they had been earlier in trying to combat the communists and that the security situation did deteriorate. On the other hand, McNamara, who went out to Vietnam shortly thereafter as I recall, came back and did report that contrary to what the U.S. military had been saying during the last months of the Diem government, the military situation they found had actually been deteriorating several months prior to the time that the coup took place. So this was a reversal on the part of McNamara and our military as to what the military situation had been during the political chaos during the summer and fall of 1963. Actually, if one looks back with some hindsight now, one looks at John Vann's report on the fight that took place at Ap Bac in January of 1963 where he reported that the South Vietnamese under the Diem government had not really pursued the Viet Cong in a battle there. But this was not accepted, of course, as the general assessment of our leading military people in Vietnam, including General Harkins. That position was reflected by both McNamara and General Taylor as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington. But there certainly was this reversal after the coup took place in October of what our military, including our civilian authorities in the Defense Department, had thought was really taking place in terms of the military situation. You remember when I went out in September with General Krulak, he came back reporting that the military situation was going swimmingly and that the political turbulence was confined to Saigon and hadn't affected what was happening in the field. All that got reversed. I felt, as I think I indicated the last time, somewhat justified in the assessment I had made in September as to what the military, including McNamara, found had actually been taking place at that time in Vietnam.

LC: How much of this was laid at the time to deliberate distortion of troop strengths within ARVN and other facts that—

JM: Well, McNamara I think specifically stated that it was found that the reports of what was going on militarily in the provinces, which came primarily from the Vietnamese, had been accepted by our top military people, but not by some of the lower level people like John Vann, that we were being fed falsely optimistic reports by the South Vietnamese government under Diem and Nhu.

LC: Was there any fear or discussion that possibly the generals might open a separate channel of discussion with the NLF at this point or in the succeeding weeks?

JM: Well, I think that there was some. As I've just indicated there was some concern that because of the neutralist position adopted by de Gaulle and the *New York Times* and the fact that there were questions being raised within South Vietnam as to whether this represented a future U.S. policy change. I think there was equal concern that this could conceivably influence the generals. We'll get in a few minutes to the Khanh coup at the end of January of 1964. He stated that one of the reasons for his coup was that the generals who had led the coup and were in charge of the previous government had been moving toward a negotiation with North Vietnam for a neutralist solution, but I don't think there was ever any specific evidence that he was able to bring forth in support of that charge.

LC: Okay. Let me ask you about any preparations that you remember for what we know call the Honolulu Conference within the State Department? Do you remember making preparations for this meeting which was, I gather, to draw together the secretary of defense, the secretary of state—

JM: Well, certainly I don't remember specifically, Laura, what preparations were made, but obviously we did make them. I may have been deeply involved because in November Paul Kattenburg, who was the director of the Vietnam Working Group, went to Vietnam on an official visit. Hilsman had me temporarily replace him. As I was going to say a little later, I'll say it now, right after Kattenburg returned he was removed from the position and I was actually named officially to take over the directorship of the Vietnam Working Group. Actually, I was at the Honolulu Conference and sat in the general sessions. There must have been a lot of closed sessions, too, at which I was not present. I can't say that I was very impressed with anything that took place in the general sessions which I attended. At the Honolulu meeting I didn't see anything very significant coming out of that big meeting at all.

LC: Let me ask first of all about Kattenburg's visit to Vietnam. Roughly, this was before the assassination of Kennedy?

JM: Yes. It may have lopped over that. I can't remember whether Kattenburg had gotten back. He probably had not gotten back by the time of the Kennedy

assassination.

LC: Okay. What was the purpose for his going out there? Was it to make a survey of the situation?

JM: I think so. As the director of the Vietnam Working Group he had not been out there for a long time and I think wanted to make a visit. He thought it was an appropriate time after the overthrow of the Diem regime and the installation of the generals in the new government. I don't think there was anything more deeply involved in the timing of that visit than what I've just indicated.

LC: What was his relationship with Hilsman?

JM: Well, I was going to say it was Hilsman's decision to replace Kattenburg with myself as director of the Vietnam Working Group. I think Hilsman was motivated by a couple of factors. One, Kattenburg came back from his trip to Vietnam confirmed in the views that he had held somewhat more tentatively before that our policy in Vietnam was really hopeless, that we could not win there and that we should be withdrawing. He began to voice these views throughout the department, including to higher-level people. People got very upset and concerned since this was so contrary to the policy approach of both the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations. I think this was probably the principal factor in Kattenburg's removal. The other factor was that Kattenburg was not a particularly effective bureaucrat. Instead of getting the papers prepared, which fell within his responsibility, he was often wandering around the department talking to people, pushing his views on the situation rather than getting his actual work done. I think that was a second, but subsidiary factor in Hilsman's removal of him.

LC: Well, Joe, would you take us through the weeks that led up to the president's assassination and your own trip out to Hawaii and what you recall about it?

JM: Well, I can't recall many of the details now, Laura. I've just indicated the main things that I can remember, that we must have been deeply involved in the preparations since the secretary of state was also at that meeting together with the secretary of defense. My own attendance at it, which I've never looked back upon as being either very eventful as far as I was concerned or as far as U.S. policy in Vietnam was concerned. I think there was already some concern—this was a meeting, I think, in

Honolulu took place within a couple of weeks I think of the coup. Maybe it was a little longer than that. I think there was already some concern that because of the delay on the part of the generals on getting their handle on fighting the war because of their involvement in political affairs that the situation was worsening militarily. I think that was a concern that started to be brought out even that early. I think it was not too long thereafter that McNamara made his trip and that may have been in December—I believe it was in December—to Vietnam and came back with that view on his part strengthened.

LC: What was the reason that the secretaries and all the staffs went to Hawaii in the first place? Why was the meeting held there?

JM: I think the Washington authorities wanted a general assessment of how things were going under the new government of the generals with our leading officials in Saigon, the ambassador, the head of the Military Assistance Command, and the director of USOM.

LC: So it was a convenient halfway point, essentially.

JM: Right, exactly.

LC: You returned—

JM: Just remember in that connection, Laura, that President Kennedy was extremely inclined throughout all those turbulent months of the summer and fall of 1963 to send somebody out from Washington to get a direct assessment of the Vietnam situation, either on the ground in Vietnam or meeting with our leading officials from Vietnam in some convenient intermediate place such as Honolulu. It was a propensity on Kennedy's part to do that sort of thing rather than simply relying on the reporting that was coming in by cable.

LC: The predilection for sending out a mission.

JM: Exactly. After all, he did it repeatedly in the summer and fall.

LC: You're right. You're right. Where were you then when you found out that the president had been shot? Joe, do you remember?

JM: I think I had not actually taken over the Vietnam Working Group at that point because I remember I think I was in Hilsman's office when he got—I guess we got the word on TV. I don't know whether I was in Hilsman's office, but I remember seeing him shortly thereafter and he, of course, was terribly shocked because he was close to

President Kennedy. As you'll see as I go on the Kennedy assassination affected Hilsman's position very gravely as the weeks unfolded. He was very, very upset and I was very quickly designated when the plans were being gotten together for the foreign delegations for the funeral as the U.S. representative to accompany the South Vietnamese representative at the funeral. So I did get involved in a number of the funeral activities. Shall I describe those?

LC: Yes, please. Who was—first—

JM: Tranh Chang Thanh, whom I had known, but not closely when I was in Vietnam. I think he was the minister for information when I was in Vietnam. At that point I believe he was the Vietnamese ambassador to Tunisia. I think the three leading generals who had led the coup felt that they could not absent themselves from Vietnam at that stage for Kennedy's funeral. They designated him to represent them. We dressed in formal mourning outfit with a top hat. I accompanied the South Vietnamese representative to the funeral site, which was in a rather small Catholic church in Washington. I did not go inside with him because there wasn't sufficient room for the State Department escort people with foreign representatives. We remained in the car during the funeral. Then when Tranh Chang Thanh came out of there we joined the funeral procession to Arlington Cemetery. Interestingly at the cemetery there was no protocol organization according to rank and precedence. Everyone just sort of crowded around the gravesite while the brief ceremony over the grave was being conducted. I remember [standing] there. Of course, all of the leading officials, Rusk, McNamara, I assume Johnson was there, but I can't remember. He must have been there. I don't specifically recall seeing him there. But it was interesting. There was no precedence at all. We were all just sort of crowding around. Then after the ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, Jackie had indicated that she would be giving tea at the White House to the foreign leaders who had come as representatives of their governments at the funeral and that she would receive privately any of those leaders who wanted to speak to her. So I accompanied the South Vietnamese representative, Tranh Chang Thanh, to the White House for the tea. Tranh Chang Thanh did not seek a private meeting with Jackie, but the leading people like the British prime minister, Lord Home, General de Gaulle and quite a number of others did. I managed to be close to and even talk to some of these

senior officials at the tea while they were waiting or subsequent to their reception by Jackie Kennedy. At one point I was standing very close to Lord Home and the only significant thing I heard come out of his mouth was he turned to one of his colleagues and said, "Why don't we go have some tea at this place?" So that's not very significant politically, Laura. The other more interesting thing was Tranh Chang Thanh turned to me and said, "I know Couve de Murville, the French foreign minister," who was also there. He said, "Let's go over and get Couve to introduce us to General de Gaulle." So I went with him and Couve did introduce us to General de Gaulle. We stood and talked with him for a little while. The one interesting assessment I came to out of that brief meeting with de Gaulle, the only time I ever saw him closely, was the impression of arrogance and haughtiness which I think is the general one among the public, I think not only in the U.S., but even in France itself was to a very considerable degree motivated by his nearsightedness. He couldn't see very well over that long nose. So he gave the impression of being extremely haughty. We did talk to him for a while. Another person that I talked to at the funeral whom I had not met before and I went up and introduced myself because I recognized him was General Nasution of Indonesia. Sukarno was, of course, the real power in Indonesia, but it was felt that the military leader and the potential leading rival, if anybody should challenge Sukarno at that stage, was thought to be Nasution. I remember having a rather considerable conversation with him. Of course I didn't bring up any political matters, but I did have a chance to have a very good talk with him.

LC: What was your impression? What impression did you form, of course, briefly?

JM: From that brief social encounter, favorable, but I was not in any way to assess him as his leadership capability on the basis of that brief meeting.

LC: Joe, can I just clarify? Did you then walk in the procession behind the casket?

JM: No. No, I don't think so. I suppose that the South Vietnamese representative didn't. Since I was not going into the church I think I just stayed in the car and picked up the South Vietnamese representative when the funeral ceremony in the church was over. No. I did not walk in the procession as I recall, Laura.

LC: Okay. Then drove over the bridge to Arlington.

JM: In the long, slow procession. There in the procession to the funeral everything was organized according to protocol, but as I say, interestingly once we arrived at Arlington, there wasn't any protocol.

LC: Yes. I've seen the photographs where there is just a great group of dignitaries and you can kind of pick out some of them. De Gaulle is certainly among them. In the line or in the group waiting at the White House for the private meetings with Mrs. Kennedy, can you tell a little bit about the mood and reconstruct that a little bit? This is certainly something that wasn't filmed, at least as far as the public was aware of.

JM: Well, of course, I didn't see any of the sessions with Jackie herself.

LC: No, but—

JM: In the big room at the White House where tea was being served the mood was generally sober, naturally. I don't think there was any—there were certainly no histrionics, nobody expressing extreme grief. People were talking quietly and socially and having a cup of tea and munching on the goodies. I think, Laura, in a way it's not all that different from the small funerals I've attended where—certainly when I was a kid when people used to come from some distance and there was always a big luncheon prior to the funeral—and these were funerals at home—big luncheon and then after the luncheon everybody went into the living room and parlor for the funeral ceremony. In a sense, the atmosphere wasn't all that different, I would say, from a family funeral in a sense.

LC: Did you have a feeling that things, at least as far as U.S.-Vietnam relations were concerned, things would change now or did you think not? Do you remember?

JM: No. I didn't have any particular sense that things were going to change as far as our policy was concerned in any way. No, not at all. I'll continue, Laura.

LC: Yes, please. Sure. Of course.

JM: One more thing about the day of the funeral. That evening, President Johnson—he had been sworn in, of course, very shortly after Kennedy's assassination, but he had held himself in the background until the funeral was over. But that evening after the funeral he quite naturally, I think, and appropriately, held a big reception on the

eighth floor of the State Department in the diplomatic reception rooms for all the visiting dignitaries from abroad and used that as an occasion for a few minutes of private conversation with selected leaders from abroad. I did accompany the South Vietnamese representative to that reception, went through the receiving line. I don't think either Johnson or Mrs. Johnson really recognized me from the visit a little more than two years earlier to South Vietnam when he was vice president. I don't recall anything of significance that I observed at that reception, but Johnson did hold that as I would say just about one of his first official acts as president and certainly one of his first acts that was a public occasion.

LC: Presumably many of the same leaders stayed in town long enough to attend that.

JM: Right. I think most of them had stayed overnight. I think de Gaulle and others were all present at that reception because that had been part of the schedule. I think they felt that they should confirm relations between their countries and the United States and should stay over for this reception by the new president.

LC: Did you have any further official duties accompanying the South Vietnamese representative?

JM: No, Laura. That was a very full day and there were no more. I think I was exhausted at the end of the day. Not that I had done that much, but there's a certain amount of tension, of course.

LC: Absolutely. Of course, events were continuing in Dallas. Did you keep track of events there at all?

JM: Oh, yes, certainly via TV. I think you're talking about the fact that Oswald was seized and was almost immediately assassinated by—I've forgotten the guy's name who did it.

LC: Jack Ruby?

JM: Yeah. That's right. That was it, which also was, of course, a sensational thing and I think contributed to some of the conspiracy theories that have been concocted over the years about Kennedy's assassination.

LC: Joe, what were the next important events? Was it then that you—?

JM: Well, Laura, let me say shortly thereafter I did take over officially as the

director of the Vietnam Working Group. Hilsman asked me to. At that point I was deputy director of the newly organized office of Far Eastern Regional Affairs. This position, director of the Vietnam Working Group, also had the title of Deputy Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. In a sense I was not quite as close to Hilsman as I had been earlier because then my office was on the same floor with his and he would call me in directly. Once I took over this position, I had between him and me the director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, H.L.T. Koren, known as Barney Koren, whom I had known slightly during my earlier service in Switzerland and had not particularly liked at that stage, but it turned out that he and I got along extremely well during the several weeks of our relationship with him as the director of Southeast Asian Affairs, including Vietnam, and I as one of his deputy directors and director of the Vietnam Working Group. We had very good working relations during those few weeks and seemed to be carrying on quite well. The next significant event that took place was the coup of General Khanh at the end of January 1964. If you'd like to go into that now we can.

LC: Sure. As you mentioned, the Secretary of Defense did go out, I think it was at the end of December, and returned with his report, which you've discussed. Why don't you lead us through, if you can, the events related to the coup as you recall them?

JM: Well, as I say, I was then director of the Vietnam Working Group. I got the flash message that came in that Khanh had mounted a coup against the three generals who had led the coup against Diem. Almost immediately Marshall Green who was the principle deputy assistant secretary in Far Eastern Affairs and who was the acting assistant secretary at that particular moment because Hilsman was away, said, "I've just been summoned to the office of George Ball," the number two in the State Department and I think he was probably the acting secretary then. I think the secretary away also. He said that Ball wanted him to come up and tell him about Khanh and the coup there. So Marshall immediately summoned me and I briefed him on the steps on the way up between his floor and the seventh floor as to what I knew about Khanh. I said that I knew Khanh personally, not well but I knew him. I knew that he was a firm anti-communist and that my assessment, based on my brief contact with him, that he was a very able and energetic official. Marshall took these words to Ball and reassured

him. The first suspicion in Washington was that this might be a pro-communist coup. That's the, I think, most important thing to allay. Then the second point was that Khanh was an able and energetic individual. I did have immediately, which I didn't express to Marshall, but was an obvious reaction, I think, some concern over the fact that this coup had taken place so soon after the coup against Diem, three months later and that it certainly began to smack of political instability within South Vietnam that the group of generals who had displaced Diem were so soon displaced themselves by General Khanh. I also almost immediately began to suspect that Khanh may have been encouraged by some of our own military, not at the top level, but below the top level in Vietnam, to mount this coup because of their concern of the fact that the generals who had led the coup against Diem were not continuing to push the war as vigorously as they thought should be done. I've never had that actually confirmed, but the suspicion still remains in my mind, particularly on the part of a colonel who was, I think, assigned to Hue. General Khanh was not—that was Military Region I—he was not actually in command there. He was in command of Military Region II at the time the coup was mounted, which was the lower part of central Vietnam, south of Hue. But for some reason I've long held the suspicion that I think he may have encouraged Khanh in this coup.

LC: An American colonel?

JM: Yeah. An American colonel, right.

LC: Was John Helble in Hue at this time still?

JM: Yes. John, I think, was still there at that point. I've never discussed that. That's an interesting point, Laura. I've never actually discussed this with John. I should at some point to see whether he had that feeling.

LC: But overall—

JM: He knew this colonel in Hue, obviously.

LC: Overall, your sense of General Khanh was developed during your earlier interaction with him. Can you just recast that for us?

JM: Actually, I'd had only one official contact that I can recall with General Khanh, who when I was the head of the political section in the embassy in Saigon, I called on him by appointment one day to discuss some military problem related to the

Geneva Accords and the International Control Commission. I was quite impressed with the way Khanh rather effectively handled the situation with me that I had raised with him. In other words, I came away from that official contact on a point of business favorably impressed by him. I knew from reputation that he appeared not at all indecisive at that point, but quite vigorous and quite abreast of what was going on. So I did come away with a favorable impression, which was part of the reason I felt able to say what I did to Marshall Green.

LC: What was the outcome? Did Green come and speak to you after his meeting with George Ball?

JM: No. I don't think he came and spoke to me directly. Interestingly, Laura, I'll give you a couple of subsequent reflections of that brief briefing of Green. He mentioned it in my efficiency report, which he prepared several months later, of course reflecting on me very favorably. The last time I saw Marshall must have been about forty years later at a dinner hosted by Barbara Colby in the Sulgrave Club in Washington. Marshall and I were both guests. We were seated on either side of Barbara. I maintained some contact with Marshall over the years, although never very close. I always liked him and I think he liked me. But he brought up at that dinner this particular briefing. That was interesting to me forty years later that he still remembered that and still commented on it very favorably.

LC: Now, you're a modest man, Joe, but can you tell us what he said?

JM: Well, I think he said, "You gave me exactly what I needed to say to Ball." Marshall, of course, was interested in acting briefly as acting assistant secretary. Marshall was interested in, from the standpoint of his own career future, in making a good impression on the number two in the State Department. I think he did with the reassurance he was able to give him on the two points I've indicated. So Marshall had obviously still remembered that so many years later.

LC: It certainly was a critical time, of course, because the United States—

LC: Right, because as I say, the great concern, which was immediately felt in Washington, was that this might be pro-communist. I remember that when the first coup attempt occurred in November 1960, my wife and I got the word over the telephone about, I guess, 2:00 or 3:00AM at home. Her immediate answer was, "Were the

Communists taking over?" I said no. So her concern then and Washington's concern in 1964 were rather similarly motivated. As you can see, I was able to assure them that I didn't think the communists had sufficient strength to mount a coup in Saigon at that stage.

LC: Well, there's that piece. There's also the fact that you knew who General Khanh was and I think that speaks to the importance that you've underscored at various points in the interview of having had on-the-ground experience.

JM: Exactly. Absolutely, Laura. I think that's a very important point.

LC: Well, Joe, let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [26] of [57]
Date: September 2, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the second of September 2005. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking by telephone from his home in Nevada. Good morning again, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thanks again for your time, of course. Joe, if you would, could you please recap the architecture within the State Department of the Vietnam Working Group and your own position there in early 1964?

JM: I'll revert a little to late '63.

LC: That would be fine. Sure. Of course.

JM: The Vietnam Working Group, by I should say, I think the second half of '63 and early '64, was part of the office of Southeast Asian Affairs. That office was headed by a director who had two deputy directors, one of whom was the director of the Vietnam Working Group and the other deputy director was responsible for the other Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Malaya and Singapore. The Office of Southeast Asian Affairs reported to the assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. It was one of several geographic offices under the assistant secretary, the others being the office of Southwest Pacific Affairs, the office of Chinese Affairs and the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, which was comprised of Japan and Korea. In September of [1963] the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs created also an office of Regional Affairs. Each of the other, almost all of the other geographic bureaus were doing the same thing at that time and that office consisted of various advisors who had been reporting directly to the assistant secretary, the principal of whom were the planning advisor, the man in charge of SEATO—Southeast Asian Treaty Organization—affairs, labor advisor, and the United Nations advisor. Each bureau tended to have these individual advisors reporting to the assistant secretary. It was thought that it would increase efficiency, lessen the load of direct reporting to the assistant secretary if those advisors were formed into an office with a director and deputy director just as the geographic offices like Southeast Asian Affairs,

Southwest Pacific Affairs. So that was the setup as of late 1963.

LC: Which, from which—

LC: I was named deputy director of the Office of Regional Affairs. The director was Richard Usher. I continued in what I had been doing during the summer, essentially serving as a special advisor to Roger Hilsman, the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, on Vietnam matters. I was not formally part of the Vietnam Working Group, but Hilsman often had me working on special projects with respect to Vietnam for him.

LC: Now who was the other deputy director then of the, not the Regional Affairs Office but the Office of Southeast Asian affairs?

JM: That was Norman Hannah.

LC: Can you—

JM: The director was H.L.T. Koren, Barney Koren, whom I think I mentioned the last time.

LC: You did mention him, but I wonder if you can give any background on him.

JM: Koren, I think, had been in the Department of Defense. I know he was a colonel, but I think he was a colonel in the Reserve. He may have been on active duty. He became a Foreign Service officer, I think around 1952. He entered at mid-grade level as a lot of non-career Foreign Service officers did at that point. I think his first assignment was to Switzerland where I was assigned at the time. I came to know him slightly, not well as I think I said the last time. The limited knowledge I had of him at that point, I didn't particularly care for him, but when I found myself in November of '63 assigned by Hilsman to replace the director of the Vietnam Working Group, I found myself as concomitantly deputy director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs reporting to Koren. He and I got along extremely well and I came to respect him very substantially during the period in which I worked for him there. We worked very closely.

LC: Mm-hmm. Did he have similar political outlook on affairs in Southeast Asia and particularly Vietnam as you did?

JM: Yes. I think we did. By the time I became director of the Vietnam Working Group the coup had taken place in Vietnam and that was really no longer a major issue. I don't recall what views he had held with respect to whether Diem should be replaced or not. It certainly never arose in my working relationships with him. The other deputy

director, Norman Hannah, I had also known slightly, particularly in 1955 when he was the desk officer for Iran, country in which he had served. I was for just thirty days a special assistant to the office of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Affairs. I came to know Norm Hannah a bit at the time. From 1963 on I came to know Hannah much better, of course, working closely with him in the Office of Southeast Asian affairs. Then later when I was in Laos he was in Thailand as the number two in the embassy and I saw him from time to time there. So I came to know Norm quite well.

LC: So he became DCM in Bangkok?

JM: In Bangkok. But I think he moved to that job from his deputy directorship in the Office of Southeast Asian affairs. That was the organizational setup as of late ’63 and early ’64. I’ll get to it in a moment about the cataclysmic change, if I may so label it that occurred in February of [1964] in terms of organization. Laura, I first would like to add one thing with respect to General Khanh, who mounted the coup which we discussed the last time.

LC: Yes, please do.

JM: At the end of January, [1964] I mentioned that I gave Marshall Green, who was the acting assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs and for then the Far Eastern Affairs—the name was, I think it was changed about that time. I’ve forgotten the exact date from Far Eastern Affairs to East Asian Affairs with no change in the jurisdiction of the bureau. Anyway, when we got the first news of the coup I indicated that I reported to Marshall Green that the Khanh coup had no reason to fear was a pro-communist coup at all and that from my experience with Khanh I held a positive view of his ability. As the early months of the Khanh regime came to pass, other officials, particularly the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, came to hold the same view of Khanh. He went to Vietnam in, I think, March of [1964] on a visit and lauded Khanh to the skies as an excellent chief executive in Vietnam. Actually it turned out that Khanh’s performance did not live up to his promise at all. It was really disappointing. He was both impetuous and indecisive, impetuous in some of his decisions he did take and certainly indecisive in dealing with the major threat which arose to his government during the several months that he was in charge. The major threat was from Buddhist radicals. He did not appear willing to confront them, partly I think because the Buddhists identified him closely with

the Diem regime which had been overthrown and partly because I think it turned out that Khanh didn't have the courage or decisiveness which a lot of us had thought earlier that he would. I'd thought and McNamara and I think General Maxwell Taylor, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who went to Vietnam as ambassador in July of [1964] also—I think they initially held similar views, which were subsequently, of course, disappointed and disillusioned, just as mine were, as far as Khanh was concerned.

LC: Would that disillusion do you think have begun to set in let's say by the fall of 1964? I'm thinking November.

JM: Oh, yes, earlier.

LC: October or November? Okay. Much earlier than that.

JM: Even earlier than that I would say. I would say even by late summer it had begun to set in. It worsened, of course, as the months passed there. I just thought I would add that.

LC: Yes. It's useful.

JM: So the record does reflect my view as well as the view of others that Khanh proved a major disappointment. I also regretted the coup when it took place because I felt that even though I had a high regard for Khanh at that stage I felt that another coup led by a military leader three months after the coup by the military that overthrew Diem smacked of political instability and, of course, as events transpired in the year [1964] and the earlier part of [1965] that certainly proved to be the case. South Vietnam was really in political chaos during much of that period, unfortunately.

LC: Joe, can I ask you just breaking in for a moment about whether you recall anything in the cable traffic from Saigon immediately before Khanh's coup about his contacts with the ambassador suggesting, he being Khanh, suggesting that a coup was about the take place and that it would be led by neutralists who might be reluctant to accept U.S. aid and direction in terms of their relationships with North Vietnam?

JM: Laura, I cannot specifically recall. That was certainly, I think, the principal—well, one of the principal reasons that Khanh gave for mounting the coup, that he thought that the three generals who led the successful coup effort against Diem were moving in a neutralist direction, influenced by France, and that they were going to really move South Vietnam under the neutralist camp to the advantage of the communists. I do

not recall, Laura, that those indications of neutralism were reflected in the cable traffic. Now I could be wrong on that score. They may have been. I think subsequent to the coup they certainly did get into the cable traffic. I think at some point even Lodge felt that there might be some substance to them. I've never felt that there was any real likelihood that those generals were tending in that direction.

LC: You mention, Joe, that there was some suggestion about French influence in driving the generals in a neutralist direction or at least there was a suggestion that might be the case. Does this link back to the statements that de Gaulle made that you discussed earlier?

JM: Yes, of course. Because the indications and not just the indications, but the definite statements, public statements, by de Gaulle in late 1963 that he thought that the solution to the political and military events in Southeast Asia was to neutralize Vietnam but he never had any practical view as to how this could be accomplished in any realistic sense since North Vietnam was under communist control and linked with Communist China and the Soviet Union. That plus the fact that the *New York Times* at about the same time began to move in the same direction as de Gaulle with editorials very much in favor of neutralization of South Vietnam certainly aroused fears in Vietnam that this might drive the U.S. government into following a similar policy, although there was no indication of that whatsoever. As a matter of fact, we gave repeated assurances to the government in South Vietnam and made public statements to that effect.

LC: Mm-hmm. Just as a matter of curiosity, how much cable traffic would you have seen coming from Paris as the head of the Vietnam Working Group? Would you have been on distributions for anything that came from Paris that—

JM: Certainly if it pertained to Vietnam, yes, we would have.

LC: Okay. So—

JM: We would have seen it. Now it is possible that there were very restricted distribution messages, not only from Paris and Saigon certainly also, which I did not see. I'm not sure that I saw as much of that kind of traffic once I became director of the Vietnam Working Group as I had when I had been special assistant to Hilsman. Certainly after the earthquake, which I'm going to mention in a few minutes, I did not see it. From, let's say, most of February on I did not see that kind of traffic, which I could

tell from looking at and reading through the official volume on *U.S. Foreign Relations with Vietnam* during 1964. There was much that I did not see because it was extremely restricted traffic.

LC: Just for a moment, because this is something that we haven't taken up before but I think will be instructive for people who have less familiarity with the different levels of classifications, could you quickly go over, Joe, the kinds of materials and how they might sort themselves in the classification process and who actually makes those decisions?

JM: There were when I was in the government and there may still be—I just don't know what's happened—four security classifications of documents, "top secret" being the top level of security classification. Then "secret," third "confidential," and the bottom one was earlier called restricted and then became "for official use only." Those were the four levels of classification, but in addition to those levels of classification of written documents there were many indicators of how the written traffic, particularly cables, should be distributed. There could be "eyes only for the president" let's say from the ambassador in Vietnam and there were quite a number of those, or "eyes only for the president or the secretary of state or secretary of defense." There was called "NODIS" which meant "no distribution." That was usually linked to the "eyes only" for the specific top-level officials. Then there was "EXDIS." That was somewhat wider distribution. There was limited distribution and what have you. So you've got both classification of documents and various levels of how documents even within those classifications should be distributed.

LC: Was it the senior originator of the document, not necessarily the drafter, who would make that decision?

JM: Usually the drafter would apply—oh, on the distribution. I thought you were talking about classification.

LC: No. I'm just—

JM: On distribution, yes, it was usually originator. Usually, Laura, in the case of those very high distribution limitations the originator was often also the drafter.

LC: Right. There wouldn't be another person involved. Okay. That helps to clarify, too, the fact that not everyone knew the same things.

JM: Not by any means. The lower you were on the totem pole the less you knew, of course.

LC: The less you knew. Right. Right. Well, if you would, Joe, please lead us through the events following General Khanh's successful coup.

JM: Yes. Let me give a little background for these events.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: There was a major feud in the government between Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs in the State Department Roger Hilsman. Hilsman had been in the Army during World War II serving in Burma and had a great deal of experience in guerilla warfare. He felt very strongly that the Department of Defense and our military were training the South Vietnamese to fight the wrong kind of war at that point, that is a conventional war rather than dealing with the guerilla type of activities which characterized most of the communist insurgent activities at that stage. He constantly urged within the government as well as publicly that the Department of Defense should revise its approach. This infuriated both our military and Secretary of Defense McNamara. The second thing is that McNamara and Hilsman were in diametrically opposed positions with respect to the effectiveness of the Diem government and the conduct of the war. That, of course, had been in a sense resolved by the coup in October of '63, but this better enmity continued. It was well known certainly in bureaucratic circles and I think even outside them. Hilsman had had a sort of special relationship with Kennedy as long as he was president. I remember being in his office once when President Kennedy telephoned him directly to discuss something. I think this happened on other occasions as well. So Hilsman had a direct line to Kennedy and as long as Kennedy was president, I think Hilsman's position was unassailable. But with Kennedy's assassination in November of '63 and Lyndon Johnson's ascension to the presidency, Hilsman lost this special relationship completely. He had no access to Lyndon Johnson whereas McNamara, who had been close to Kennedy also succeeded in establishing the same kind of relationship with Lyndon Johnson. So by February of [1964] this feud came to a head. The first thing that happened was that Vietnam was totally lifted outside—as far as the State Department was concerned—was totally lifted outside the jurisdiction of the Assistant Secretary for Far

Eastern Affairs Hilsman and attached directly to the Secretary of State Dean Rusk. The public explanation of this at the time was that Vietnam was so important in foreign policy that the secretary of state was taking personal responsibility for the day-to-day handling of Vietnam affairs.

LC: You chuckle there, Joe.

JM: Hmm?

LC: You chuckled a little bit.

JM: Well, after all, he has some other responsibilities, too. I think that's probably the first time in history that the secretary of state has in effect become the desk officer for a particular country. I don't think that had ever happened and as I shall indicate as this talk goes on, Laura, this was really a facade. The Vietnam Working Group was lifted out, of which I was the director, was lifted outside the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs and placed in the operations center on the seventh floor, the operations center being the crisis center for the State Department. We were given offices right inside the operations center. We were then on the same floor with the assistant secretary, or with the secretary of state, excuse me. Bill Sullivan, who had been for quite some time a very highly regarded special assistant to Averell Harriman who was then the number three in the State Department and was well known by the secretary of state and by others and by McNamara. It was figured that he could well get along with McNamara, was named Special Assistant to the Secretary of State in charge of Vietnam. I, as director of the Vietnam Working Group, was the second in charge there. Let me conclude with what happened to Hilsman before I describe how that operation actually worked out in practice.

LC: Okay.

JM: The second blow to Hilsman occurred within, I think, two or three weeks. A crisis arose in our relations with Prince Sihanouk, the mercurial leader of Cambodia who was threatening to move totally into the communist camp. The decision was made that we should send somebody out, some high-ranking official out to Cambodia for a special talk with Sihanouk to try to explain our position and to try to induce him not to proceed with this threat to move into the communist camp. Hilsman expected to be that official, but the choice by the secretary of state landed not on Hilsman but on Alexis Johnson,

who was the number four official in the hierarchy in the Department of State and the senior Foreign Service officer at that point. So this second blow to Hilsman's jurisdiction over important Asian affairs led to Hilsman's immediate resignation and his return to the academic profession. He had been professor at Columbia before and I think he returned there at that point and very shortly thereafter published his book on the foreign policy of President Kennedy called *To Move a Nation*, a book with which I'm sure you are familiar. So this whole operation drove Hilsman out of the government, which was the purpose of it, this organizational change.

LC: You think that it was purposefully designed to?

JM: Oh, absolutely, Laura. The confirmation of that assessment is that within—let's see, this was February—within half-a-year or possibly a little less or possibly a little more, the whole Vietnam operation was placed back under the jurisdiction of the new assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, William Bundy, who had occupied a similar position in the Department of Defense under McNamara and got along extremely well with McNamara. So that showed to me the transparency of the whole thing, that it was designed to drive Hilsman out of the government. I'm sure had been cleared with Lyndon Johnson, who as I say, had no relationship with Hilsman and no reason to defend him.

LC: How do you think that McNamara was able to establish such a good and apparently effective working relationship with the new president? Because that really is part of the source of all of this movement, the fact that McNamara was—

JM: Laura, well, I can only guess at how he was able to, but he certainly did succeed in doing so. McNamara was in effect the leader under the president, had been the leader certainly in '61 and '62 and '63, the leader in formulation of U.S. policy toward Vietnam. He had taken the most active role, certainly in executing that policy and I think in helping to formulate it. Of course, the president was ultimately responsible, both Kennedy and subsequently Johnson, but he certainly did succeed in doing so. Interestingly, Laura, while we're on this subject, I think Dean Rusk as secretary of state came to occupy higher position and esteem in the president's mind under Lyndon Johnson than he had held under Kennedy. In the meetings which I attended in the White House, the National Security Council meetings dealing with Vietnam, Rusk never

seemed to take much of an initiative. He didn't seem to be a leader at all. These meetings were devoted primarily to the question of how things were going in Vietnam and what we should do about President Diem. He didn't express very strong views either way, but certainly after Johnson took over and certainly by 1965—I don't know whether this was true in '64—Johnson held weekly luncheons with Rusk, McNamara and I think his national security advisor on Vietnam. Those were held every week on Tuesday to deal with Vietnam affairs.

LC: Do you have any sense of how that transition occurred?

JM: No, Laura. Maybe the fact that they were both Southerners helped.

LC: That could be, different military experiences.

JM: Of cours, McNamara was not so I doubt that this was a very significant factor. I just said this sort of jokingly, but no, Laura. That kind of interpersonal relationship at that level, I have no real feeling for how or why it worked out the way it did, but that is the way it did work out.

LC: Did either you yourself or Hilsman ever express to you during this time period, during the critical days in February of '64, express any upset or disappointment with the secretary of state not backing him up?

JM: No. I don't recall that he did. The man who was probably the most influential within the State Department in formulating policy toward Diem was Averell Harriman, who had been the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs and had then moved up to become the number three official. Not just because of the position he occupied within the State Department hierarchy, not at all. I would say because Harriman was an elder statesman, one of the principal elder statesmen if not the principal one within the Democratic Party. Maybe I shouldn't say "the" I suppose. There were others like Dean Acheson, but certainly a principal elder statesmen whom Kennedy held in high regard. Harriman therefore seemed to play a much more active role with respect to Vietnam, certainly in the meetings I attended in the White House than Rusk when he was there or than Ball. I never got much of an impression of Ball being particularly active in Vietnam affairs at that stage. Although later reading through the official *Foreign Affairs* volume of the State Department on relations with Vietnam, Ball did get involved to a greater extent than I was aware of.

LC: What about William Sullivan's role in all of this? He was sort of, it sounds like, slotted in to be the person essentially above you, above the Working Group. He had, of course, had a lot to do with the development of the State Department's positions on Vietnam for a quite a while. Was he a sort of hand manipulating the puppets in any way in this set of changes?

JM: You mean in the overthrow of Hilsman, so to speak?

LC: As it were.

JM: No. I don't think Bill played a role in that because I don't think Harriman did. Harriman and Hilsman had been very close personally and professionally and certainly in their views with respect to Diem. Since Sullivan was a special assistant to Harriman at that stage I don't think either Harriman or Sullivan played any particular role in the overthrow of Hilsman. As a matter of fact, I think this was an indication of Harriman's declining influence with the president at that stage. I think Harriman had been highly respected by Kennedy, but I don't think he was that highly regarded by any means by Johnson. Reading through the *Foreign Affairs* volume, to which I have referred several times during this conversation, there is one transcript of a telephone conversation between President Lyndon Johnson and Fulbright, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Both were deriding Harriman as an old man utterly—in effect almost calling him senile and out of date. So I don't think Johnson had any high regard for Harriman at all, certainly not the regard Kennedy had held. I think the fact that Harriman did not stay too long in the number three position in the State Department—

LC: When did he actually—

JM: Did indicate that his influence with Johnson was not very great at all. It is true that Harriman then moved over—after he left the position of number three—he moved over. I don't remember exactly at what time this occurred, Laura, but he moved over to become an ambassador-at-large without any fixed responsibilities and I think no great influence on government policy for several years until 1968 when Lyndon Johnson as president turned to Harriman to initiate and lead the negotiations in Paris over the future of South Vietnam, the negotiations with North Vietnam. By that point, and I think Johnson was probably influenced in his choice of and this is my estimate and I've never seen anything confirming this, but I would think that Johnson was influenced in his

choice of Harriman for this role, by the fact that Harriman had led and conducted negotiations in ’61 and ’62 in Geneva over Laos. Of course, I feel that the agreement that came out of that, the spurious neutralization of Laos, was probably the principal factor in our loss of the war in Vietnam. But since Johnson never changed that policy he obviously didn’t have the same assessment that I did and therefore was quite willing to choose Harriman to conduct the negotiations on Vietnam. During the remainder of Johnson’s term in office to lead those negotiations in Paris.

LC: It’s interesting that you bring that up because I have been reviewing the Pentagon Papers presentation, which is of course the DOD (Department of Defense) presentation of this set of events culminating in Hilsman’s resignation. The emphasis there is very much on two pieces, the deteriorating security situation in Laos, which of course had immediate impacts on the escalation of the guerilla war in South Vietnam and also on the development of military plans, which LBJ (Lyndon B. Johnson) apparently okayed in January of 1964 to begin secret operations both north of the 17th parallel and to begin thinking about deploying U.S. troops to Thailand and even beginning to discuss operations inside Laos and Cambodia. The Laos picture to which you have referred as critical to the evolution of and eventual failure, I guess in fact, of strategy in South Vietnam begins to play certainly a picture in the Department of Defense’s history of this particular set of developments in February 1964 when Hilsman resigned. That in fact the acceptance of a set of apparently almost offensive plans to put troops and F-100 fighters into Thailand and to take action in Laos was seen as a rejection of what Hilsman had been arguing, which is you need to take action in South Vietnam itself.

JM: Laura, on that point—and I’ll certainly elaborate on my views on this question a little later when we get to a certain issue that I definitely want to raise with you.

LC: Okay. Okay. But does any of that ring a bell? Were you aware of discussions? You were the chair of the Vietnam Working Group and I just wonder how much you knew about Department of Defense planning for these different operations.

JM: I can recall, Laura, prior to the shift of the Vietnam Working Group from the Bureau of East Asian Affairs to the direct attachment to the secretary’s office, I do recall periodic meetings in I assume it was, it must have been January of [1964] with an admiral

from the Department of Defense and certain others dealing with secret operations within North Vietnam, which I think at that point we were fostering and assisting the South Vietnamese in these operations. I don't think we were directly engaging in them at this point, but we did have periodic meetings to discuss and approve or disapprove certain proposals that were put forth within this. These were highly secret operations at that stage.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: This group was highly secret. But yes, I sat on that committee briefly.

LC: Okay. I mean, it's instructive to try to sort of establish how much information you in the position you held were actually given about this other set of developments.

JM: As I say, Laura, before the shift in the organizational position of the Vietnam Working Group, as I may as well indicate right now, I had much more access to and much larger responsibilities with respect to Vietnam than I came to have after Sullivan was named the special assistant to the secretary because many of these things shifted to him at that stage. Sullivan was—can you hear me all right?

LC: Yes. I'm right here. Yes.

JM: Okay. Sullivan and I had been personal friends for quite a number of years and we remained so. Our personal relations were excellent and our working relationships were fine. But there simply was not enough work in Washington related to Vietnam to occupy both of us in this new setup where I was his number two. Certain responsibilities which I had handled before, Sullivan himself handled. I did not see all the documents any longer since I was not directly involved. As a matter of fact, as the months wore on I think both Bill Sullivan and I came to realize that I had accepted this change like a good soldier, but was not particularly happy about it, particularly since I had been promoted to Class I officer in I think March of '64. Sullivan was promoted at the same time. He and I were both Class I officers, which was very close to the top of the heap in the career Foreign Service. I felt that the job I was occupying and doing at that point was definitely below the level of my rank. But, of course, even before that promotion I had begun to feel that way simply because there wasn't really enough to occupy me fully any longer. Bill certainly understood my position. This professional relationship continued to be

conducted very well and our personal relations remained excellent. As I think I can indicate, he later chose me to be head of his economic military aid mission in Vietnam when he was ambassador to Laos. So our relations were never affected by this in any way, but there just simply wasn't enough for both of us. Then, of course, as I indicated later in the fall of 1964 the whole Vietnam operation was shifted back into the Bureau of East Asian Affairs, just where it had been before with the same kind of relationship that had existed previous to the ouster of Hilsman.

LC: Under Bill Bundy?

JM: Under Bill Bundy. Right.

LC: Had in fact Bill Bundy come over from the department—

JM: I'll get to that.

LC: Okay.

JM: I think we can proceed to that now, as a matter of fact, Laura.

LC: Okay. Sure.

JM: Shortly after Hilsman's resignation because of the events which had affected his responsibilities so greatly, William Bundy was chosen as the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs. He at that time was serving as the assistant secretary in the Department of Defense for International Security Affairs, reporting to the Secretary of Defense. He was shifted over to a position which was of an equivalent level to his in the Department of Defense. I'll mention an amusing incident on that score, Laura. At the swearing-in ceremony for Bundy, which was conducted by Dean Rusk, secretary of state himself, he made a sly remark that he was glad to see that Bill Bundy was being moved from an equivalent position in the Department of Defense to the senior department in government, the State Department. I looked at McNamara at that point and he grinned. I think his relations with Rusk were so good that he was willing to take this digging, partly because he was getting his right-hand man Bundy placed into this key position in the Department of State.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: That's the kind of thing that I don't think you'd find in the historical record.

LC: I think you're right.

JM: I caught it immediately.

LC: The Trojan horse was already inside the gate, essentially.

JM: Right. Anyway, Bundy, as you have just indicated, became officially assistant secretary of state for East Asian Affairs. It was just about that time I think that the name was changed from Far Eastern Affairs to East Asian Affairs, just to wrap up that minor point.

LC: Okay. Okay. Joe, just because of the importance of these offices, can you tell me whatever you might know about John McNaughton, who I think replaced Bill Bundy in DOD and International Security Affairs?

JM: McNaughton I believe had been the deputy to Bundy prior to the time Bundy was maybe—because I think I had met McNaughton and had sat in some meetings with him. He was elevated to that position. I think he was very highly regarded by McNamara and played a very significant role in the Department of Defense and within the U.S. government as far as policies and execution of his policies in Vietnam were concerned until he was killed, as I recall, in an airplane accident I believe in 1965. I'm not sure of that date.

LC: Yeah. I think that sounds about right. Did you have a fairly good or at least a nodding relationship with McNaughton?

JM: Yeah. I did. I think he was quite an effective official. I never found him particularly simpatico from a personal standpoint, but I might also indicate at this stage my relations with William Bundy. I had first met Bundy when he came to Vietnam on a visit in I think it was early '62. It may have been late '61. He was then the deputy assistant secretary for International Security Affairs in the Department of Defense. He came out there and I remember I found him—well, I don't think Bundy particularly liked me and I didn't particularly like him. He and I had been classmates for the year I was in Harvard Law School in '40-'41 before I was drafted, but I'm not sure I ever even saw him or met him there. So I don't have any real recollection because there were four hundred of us there divided into four sections of a hundred each. I don't think he was in my section in any of the classes. If so he didn't make any particular impression upon me. But I—

LC: Did he know that you had been there? Was he aware?

JM: Oh, I think he probably did, but I always found with respect to Bundy a sort

of whiff of superiority and condescension as far as I was concerned. This may arise from his background. His father, as I'm sure you know, had been a high State Department official under Henry Stimson, the secretary of state under Herbert Hoover from 1929-'33. William Bundy was married to a daughter of Dean Acheson, who had been secretary of state. His brother, of course, was McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor in the White House. So Bundy came from, shall we say a privileged background, one of the first Washington families, and I think was sort of aware of it. So as I say, I don't think he ever particularly liked me or I him, but I will indicate shortly here that he did choose me for one of the directorships in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs. I may as well do that right now.

LC: Sure. You can at least mention it or foreshadow it.

JM: As I had indicated, I was not very happy in the position in the Vietnam Working Group after its shift in the organizational setup in the Department of State and began to think of other possible positions more or less equivalent to my new grade of Class I officer. I think Bill Sullivan was aware of this. He may have even brought this up to Bundy. But anyway I, in the spring of '64, was asked by Bundy to come see him and he offered me the directorship of the rather newly created office of Regional Affairs in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs, which was a job that befitted my rank. So I think his view of me was not so negative that he was not willing to offer me one of the directorships in his office, in his bureau, but I never really felt close to him in any way.

LC: This was a job that—

JM: This was the job that Richard Usher had held. Usher was assigned to Manila at that stage and they needed a new man. I took over that position on July first, 1964.

LC: Now, Joe, you obviously in accepting this knew that you would have less central responsibility for Vietnam policy than you had had in earlier stage.

JM: Yes, absolutely. My wings had been clipped, in effect, Laura. I wasn't driven from the government like Hilsman, but my wings had definitely been clipped by the way this was set up. Therefore I was prepared to move to another position in which the responsibilities in some ways were less, but my responsibilities had been lessened anyway with the new set up with respect to Vietnam.

LC: Let me just ask about the follow-on relationship that you may have had with

Roger Hilsman as he went back to academia. Did you stay in touch with him?

JM: Laura, I saw Hilsman at his vacation home in Connecticut for lunch with him and his wife, I think just Nonie and myself. Whether that was afterwards or in the summer of '63 I can't distinctly remember. If it occurred afterwards that was the one contact I had afterwards. I didn't have any subsequent contacts. Hilsman, incidentally—I saw this when he was assistant secretary—used to drop a copy of all significant official documents into a special file in his office, which I think he took with him when he left and used as one of the main sources for writing his book *To Move A Nation*. I think in a way strictly illegal because they were classified documents, but I guess it's a practice that happens all too often.

LC: The two of you, though, had been on very good terms as you've portrayed it. It might be a matter of curiosity as to why his having left the department seems to have more or less severed the relationship. Was that a smart thing?

JM: Well, I think, Laura, partly because I think, probably his contacts throughout the government were very substantially less. I don't know if they were completely cut off when he resigned to return to the academic world. I think that was one thing and I think another thing as time went on as it turned out Hilsman, this was not reflected I think in his book but in subsequent public articles, Hilsman soured on the war in Vietnam and I felt began to distort the picture quite substantially in his subsequent statements and publications with respect to the war. He turned against the war in Vietnam, not I suppose an untypical flip-flop as far as a lot of Democrats were concerned. Let me put it that way.

LC: Looking at the decision that he made to resign, the decision that he delivered when he did, was it something that if you had been in his place you probably would have had to do the same thing?

JM: Well, Laura, that's a very difficult question for me to answer politically—I don't mean politically—for me to answer for this reason. Hilsman had something to return to, his academic position.

LC: I see.

JM: Whereas I as a career Foreign Service officer had to think about family and family support, too, if I had been placed in a similar position. I wouldn't have had the

same kind of thing to turn to as an alternative. So it's not easy to try to answer your question.

LC: Well, it's one of those sort of hypothetical questions that often are not easy.

JM: I think if I had been under the same circumstances as Hilsman I think I probably would have, but given my own personal and family position it would not have been so simple at all.

LC: So you don't think it was an unreasonable thing for him to do, to pull up stakes and say—

JM: No. No, not at all because clearly his authority was being diminished. I think he read the tea leaves correctly, that Johnson, Rusk, and McNamara all wanted him out of the government at that point.

LC: Can I go back very quickly to ask you about the Alexis Johnson mission to Cambodia? Do you remember or can you offer any observations on its effectiveness?

JM: Well, he did not succeed in shifting Sihanouk's position. It is true that Sihanouk never moved publicly and officially into the communist camp, but he certainly during that period and subsequently knew that the communists from North Vietnam were using his territory to move arms from the port of Sihanoukville into South Vietnam and moving it also as a sanctuary whenever they were under attack in South Vietnam. I think often the headquarters for the North Vietnamese communist operations in South Vietnam was actually located somewhere in Cambodia. I think he was aware of all these things and felt that he could do nothing about it so he just accepted it. In that sense he certainly continued to support the communists completely until his overthrow by Lon Nol, which was, what, '69 I think. No '70.

LC: Yeah, early 1970, I think.

JM: So I wouldn't say there was any favorable outcome from the Johnson mission to Sihanouk in February of '64.

LC: Do you remember anything about discussion within the State Department or did you see anything about a proposal was being advanced that the United States might try to—working together with Thailand and South Vietnam—to put together some kind of quadripartite agreement to actually guarantee Cambodia's borders? Do you remember any discussion about that?

JM: I don't remember specifically, Laura. I'm not surprised that we were attempting to do that sort of thing. Cambodia has for historic reasons always feared its two neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, because it was they who were the main enemies of Cambodia after the Khmer empire collapsed.

LC: Let's take a break there, Joe.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [27] of [57]
Date: September 9, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive, continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. This is the ninth of September 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. The ambassador is speaking by telephone again from Nevada. Joe, I was asking last time for your thoughts on the issue of MACV command and its establishment. I wonder what it is that you can offer the record on that topic.

Joseph Mendenhall: Laura, I can't give you a very detailed account from the standpoint of my personal involvement in this because I certainly wasn't involved in the change in command, but in early 1964 the Johnson administration, I think as a result of a decision by Lyndon Johnson himself, decided upon a change in the command of the U.S. forces in Vietnam. The official name of that command was Military Assistance Command, Vietnam with the acronym MACV, M-A-C-V. General Harkins had been in charge of that command since its creation in the spring of 1962 for about two years. It was decided by, as I say, I'm pretty sure by President Johnson himself that there should be a change in command at that point. There had been, I think, considerable dissatisfaction on certainly elements of the U.S. government with the performance of General Harkins. After two years of service there the change in command could be presented by the administration as something not extraordinary, something that ordinarily happens after a couple of years. The successor who was chosen was General Westmoreland. I remember in January of '64 he had an appointment with Averell Harriman, the number three official in the State Department, I think to get acquainted and to hear what Harriman had to say about Vietnam. I do remember specifically that I went up to join that as a note taker in case of necessity. As I walked in Harriman turned to me and said in effect, "I don't want or need you. This is going to be a private conversation."

LC: Oh, dear.

JM: So that turned me away from it. I guess Harriman wanted to express very strongly to Westmoreland his views about the Vietnam situation both politically and militarily. He didn't want any record kept of it. I've never seen any. There was no note

taker there. It was just the two of them, General Westmoreland and Averell Harriman. So there is no official record of what Harriman said to him. I think shortly thereafter General Westmoreland did proceed to Vietnam to replace General Harkins. The other thing that I remember with some distaste about this change in command, when General Harkins got back to Washington he was called in by President Lyndon Johnson and given, if not the highest, one of the highest military awards that the U.S. government bestows. I thought this certainly disillusioned me completely over the significance of high awards by the U.S. government. Because here this award was presented to a general whose performance had not measured up to the level that was expected by many people in Washington, yet President Johnson decided to give him this high award. I'm sure in order to avoid any political repercussions from the change in command. Johnson, I think, was supremely aware of the huge confrontation between President Truman and General McArthur when Truman relieved McArthur of his command during the Korean War. Johnson wanted to be sure he didn't get a repeat of that and the political fallout that came from it. That's, I think, a sad commentary on the significance of U.S. government awards for excellent performance.

LC: The political utility of overwhelming their significance. Joe, you mentioned that there had been growing dissatisfaction with Harkins's performance. Although we've scratched this a little bit earlier, I wonder if you can just outline some of those problems.

JM: Well, there had been, of course, great dissention between General Harkins and Amb. Henry Cabot Lodge. They disagreed completely prior to the coup against Diem on whether it was desirable that Diem be replaced in Vietnam. As a matter of fact, there are messages in the record from Ambassador Lodge which wind up saying, "General Harkins does not concur in this message." These were, I think, very highly classified messages destined for the president only or for the president and the secretary of state and defense. There had been earlier criticism, particularly by McNamara, that Lodge was not even consulting Harkins on some of the messages he had sent to Washington, very high-level messages. Obviously, Lodge decided to consult him, but just to point out quite clearly that these were his views and General Harkins did not agree with them. That disagreement went right down to the time of the coup itself. There was also very considerable criticism in certain quarters in Washington at the way General

Harkins had been advising the South Vietnamese in the training and performance of their armed forces. I think I mentioned the last time that Hilsman, the assistant secretary of state for East Asian Affairs, was really driven out of the government because he had been so critical of the way our military had handled its role with the Vietnamese armed forces that McNamara concurred in the Harkins position so there was disagreement over this. There were additional factors in this. I think the fact that General Harkins had always quite clearly accepted as being pretty accurate the reports he had been receiving from the Vietnamese government under Diem about the performance of their military forces. It turned out even McNamara admitted after the coup when he saw what actually had been taking place that our people, our military in Vietnam, had been fed a false picture by Diem and Nhu as to how things were actually fairing in the military field then. So I think even McNamara had finally reached a conclusion that he was not completely satisfied with Harkins's performance. So there were many elements there. Laura, unless you have some more questions about Harkins I'd like to go on to Westmoreland for a moment.

LC: Please do. Yes, that's fine.

JM: Westmoreland remained from the spring of '64 until I think the summer of '68—it was spring or summer—I think it was summer of '68 for about four years there. In assessing Westmoreland's performance there, my own personal view is that he was not nearly as effective at overall commander in Vietnam as his successor, General Abrams, was. That he did not—that Westmoreland did not actually conduct the proper strategy that should have been applied to the war in Vietnam, whereas General Abrams changed his substantially and did apply a much better strategy for dealing with the kinds of conflict we had there. So my overall assessment is that Westmoreland was not really a success in his role as commander-in-chief in Vietnam, whereas Abrams was a much more effective commander. That is my own assessment of those two men.

LC: Do you think that Westmoreland was too heavily influenced by the scenarios for and his own experience with European theater war?

JM: Laura, that may have been. I don't know why he did it that way. I don't think he had a thorough understanding of the enemy's strategy and approach to the war and the way that we should try to react to that because that's the next thing I wanted to get into in our discussion here is the strategy of the North Vietnamese in the war, the

North Vietnamese communists, as outlined by General Giap, the leader of the North Vietnamese armed forces. In the book that he published in 1958 with the title which I think was *People's War, People's Army*. Isn't that correct?

LC: That is correct.

JM: Yeah. I have long felt that our military—our Department of Defense, I should say, not just our military because I think this is true of McNamara as well as others—were either ignorant of that book or never paid sufficient attention to the strategy which Giap clearly outlined in that book, that the North Vietnamese would be pursuing in what they called the drive for reunification of Vietnam, which was to take over South Vietnam by armed conflict. Giap's book reminds me in many ways of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, in which Hitler also outlined in the 1920s his future plans for Germany if and when he became the leader. Particularly in the earlier years of World War II, well, in the periods prior to World War II and the rearmament of Germany and in the earlier years, he followed that outline fairly faithfully. Of course, that tended to be ignored by the European opponents of Hitler, particularly by Britain and France and I think it's fair to say by the U.S., too. Although we were not playing as significant a role in that stage in the 1930s as those two countries were. I think that the same thing really happened with respect to Giap's very clear outline of his strategy. One of the pillars of his strategy was what he called protracted warfare. This is the way the phrase was translated into English and appeared repeatedly in his book, as I recall. That meant, as he outlined, that the North Vietnamese communists were prepared to continue a long war until they achieved their victory of obtaining control of South Vietnam. They were prepared for a five-year, ten-year, or twenty-year war. I believe he even mentioned some time periods as examples in that. It's been so long since I read the book I couldn't assert that flatly. But McNamara's public statement when he returned from a trip to Vietnam in October of '63 that the U.S. would be able to withdraw a thousand of its seventeen thousand military in Vietnam at the end of '63 and ought to be able to pull out all at the end of '65 because the military situation was improving substantially in Vietnam to the point that this could be done I think totally ignored, if McNamara was ever aware, of this strategy by Giap. In other words, I felt at the time when I was opposed to this public statement by McNamara that in view of Giap's judgment nobody could tell how long that war might last. I

suppose one could even draw an analogy today to the war in Iraq. There are many Americans now that have been pushing for some time and pushing even harder now for an exit strategy on our part, which seems to me to completely ignore the indications that Osama bin Laden, as well as probably the Sunni insurgents in Iraq, are prepared for an indefinite conflict. How can we say that we're going to pull down our forces, or pull out our forces, on a fixed schedule when there is no time limit to what the enemy proposes to do? I think there's an analogy there. Unfortunately, I fear that the U.S. government never seems to have much of an institutional memory to recall what happened in earlier experiences. As you know, my greatest criticism of the U.S. political-military strategy in the war in Vietnam is that we decided to respect this spurious neutralization of Laos by the Geneva Accords of 1962 except for secret and largely ineffectual air activities against the Ho Chi Minh Trail through eastern Laos, that we forgot our experience during the Greek Civil War in 1946 to '48 when that war by the communists against the Greek government which we were supporting was going very badly for us because of the ability of the Greek communists to use Yugoslavia, in particular, as a sanctuary and an avenue for getting arms, just as the North Vietnamese communists were using Laos. Until Tito rebelled against Stalin and closed the Yugoslav frontier against the Greek communists in 1948 we were not winning that war. That proved to be the turning point. There's, I think, a very substantial analogy between the North Vietnamese use of Laos in the war in Vietnam to the Greek communists use of Yugoslavia prior to Tito's break with Stalin. But again, we never seem to recall previous experience in the U.S. government, or not sufficiently at any rate.

LC: Well, Joe, it brings up a couple of interesting questions. First of all, what do you think would have motivated General Giap to publish the book that he did in 1958? Why then? Do you have any theories?

JM: No, except that I think leaders in thought and in action love to put out to the public what they propose to do. After all, why did Hitler publish *Mein Kampf*? I could raise the same question.

LC: Correct.

JM: That's the only answer I can give, Laura.

LC: Okay.

JM: In other words, they don't hesitate to lay out in public what their plans are. We're getting today every once in a while at least a purported message from Osama bin Laden broadcast over TV as to what he's planning to do.

LC: Mm-hmm. Yes.

JM: The motivation I doubt is very different in any of these cases.

LC: I'm sure at least part of it is in the contemporary context and probably in the earlier cases, too, rallying the troops.

JM: Exactly. Exactly.

LC: The flip side of the coin also suggests itself as a question. Why would the United States not take seriously the overt public statements of the military commander who defeated the French?

JM: Well, I suppose for the same reason that the world didn't pay much attention to *Mein Kampf* in the 1930s until World War II broke out.

LC: Because it hadn't happened yet, so it wasn't an emergency yet?

JM: Excuse me? Yes, but even after the war broke out—there is a tendency, I think, within all governments to concentrate on the situation as it is today and not to look sufficiently at the background. Laura, I'll draw another analogy up between Vietnam and Iraq.

LC: Okay.

JM: The decision on the part of the Nixon administration as a result of the fact that the political support within the U.S. for the war in Vietnam had been substantially turned against support because of the Tet Offensive in 1968 the new Nixon administration decided to push Vietnamization of the war and simultaneous draw down of the U.S. forces. Those twin decisions forced the South Vietnamese to assume a substantially larger and more effective role in the war in Vietnam than they had during the preceding three or four years when the U.S. under the Johnson administration had largely taken over the war itself. I think the analogy to Iraq in that context is that there can be an effective modified form of exit strategy and that is that we should be letting the Iraqi know that by 2006 we're going to begin to withdraw some of our forces from Iraq in order to make sure that they put the maximum effort into the training and use of their forces. In other words, give them additional motivation for increasing their forces and

upgrading them to the point where they can gradually replace us. At the moment it may well be in Iraq the same sort of situation that exists in Vietnam prior to the Nixon Vietnamization and concurrent draw down on U.S. forces. There isn't sufficient incentive on the part of the Iraqis to give maximum attention to this question. So I think there can be a certain kind of effective exit strategy, but I don't think that's what the proponents of exit strategy today are really thinking of in the case of Iraq.

LC: Right. I think they're thinking three to six months and get all Americans out.

JM: Yeah, and total pullout.

LC: Yes. All Americans out.

JM: Again without any thought to the fact that the war in Europe ended in '45 and we still have—I don't know how many forces we still have in Europe. What is it? It was over a hundred thousand. So I think it's lower than that now.

LC: I think there's been some draw down, but yes a hundred

JM: Certainly the same thing's true in Korea. The Korean War was over in '53 and we still have some, oh I think some thirty thousand. Maybe we've drawn them down below that now in Iraq, but we still have substantial forces there more than half a century later in both places. Yet there is an increasing movement in the States to pull out all of our forces. It hasn't reached critical stage yet, but it's certainly starting in the U.S.

LC: Is that inevitable in U.S. politics, that public opinion will turn against foreign adventures if you want, or foreign entanglements over time or with the—

JM: Yeah. I think so, Laura. Certainly it is true today, I think. It wasn't as true certainly during World War II at all.

LC: Right. That example—

JM: But the Vietnam War and the Iraq War I think both show that the American electorate is not prepared to give total support indefinitely to a war where the outcome is not clear. In World War II, I think gradually the outcome was becoming clearer. In Vietnam and again in Iraq the outcome even today is certainly by no means totally clear. Therefore I'm afraid that the correct interpretation of political opinion in the U.S. is that support of a war of this kind will steadily erode the longer the war continues and that, therefore, to slow down that movement it's necessary to show some gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces and their replacements by the local troops themselves in both cases.

Incidentally, Nixon started the Vietnamization and gradual draw down of the U.S. forces in ’69 and came up for reelection in ’72. Despite the fact that the political tide had turned against the war in Vietnam, he still defeated McGovern overwhelmingly by losing only one state, which I think shows a very considerable political [astuteness] on the part of Nixon in being able to sustain his political position, I think, by this gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces and the concurrent improvement in the performance of the South Vietnamese. So it doesn’t necessarily mean that one has to give up completely. It’s a gradual process.

LC: But it also suggests that forward planning about the deployment of U.S. forces overseas needs to include, under the parameters that you’ve just laid out, needs to include a sense of the timetable of what can be accomplished and how long it will take.

JM: Exactly. Laura, I’d like to draw another analogy, which the news just last night raised in my mind.

LC: Sure.

JM: General Petraeus, if I’m pronouncing his name correctly, has been in charge of the training of the Iraqi forces in Iraq in order to hopefully gradually replace us. I noticed that his tour of duty’s up. I think he’s been there for one year and he’s being replaced by somebody else. That also reminds me a bit of what I think in many ways was an unfortunate policy in Vietnam, and that is the replacement of our military after a one-year tour of duty. I understand why from the standpoint of morale, but as John Paul Vann remarked in the ’70s, he said, “The United States, though it’s been here for twelve years, has not had twelve years of experience. It’s had one year of experience relearned twelve times.” I am a bit upset by the fact that Petraeus is being replaced after one year. Evidently he’s been doing a good job. So it wasn’t any question of performance. It was just that his one year tour of duty was up. I think that although that policy need not be applied to combat troops at the lower level, although even there I think there’s a long learning experience or bound to be before they become fully effective. I think in the case of senior officials, as hard-hearted as this policy may be, I’m not sure we should be replacing them that fast. In Vietnam we didn’t. After all, Westmoreland was there for four years and Abrams was there over four years, I think, as the commander-in-chief.

LC: Right. Yeah. It sounds almost like a policy made to be bent or broken at convenience. Of course one wonders whether indeed there is some other set of decisions

that are being portrayed as just the end of his duty, but some other set of decisions leading to his rotation.

JM: Laura, looking at Iraq, can you think of any top-level military official who has been there longer than a year? I can't.

LC: Military, no. No.

JM: Again, I know from my own diplomatic career that there's a period in the earlier months in a new country where one is not totally effective. You have to learn in situations how to deal with the people of that country. It's bound to be true in Iraq. I think this is somewhat unfortunate as far as achievement is concerned.

LC: Well, I'm not supposed to, but I do agree with you on this one. Let me ask a broader question about General Giap and the formation and activities of the North Vietnamese forces. Now I know, Joe, that your observations on this will be based on your gleanings over the years and not on personal observation. I don't imagine that you ever met the general.

JM: No. No. No. No.

LC: Although I believe he is still alive.

JM: Is he still alive?

LC: He is indeed, yeah. Our director here met him two years ago, perhaps.

JM: Oh, really?

LC: Yes, very interesting, in Hanoi. But I wonder if when it was that you came across the book *People's War, People's Army*.

JM: It was I believe around sometime in the 1960s. It could have been '61, but I think it was in 1960, sometime during that year. It was while I was still in Vietnam that the book came to my attention. I got a copy of it and read through it completely. Not easy reading, but as I recall it was very repetitive in some ways as military—military literature often is, unfortunately.

LC: Certainly it's a tract. It's a polemic among others—

JM: The only element of his strategy I've mentioned so far is the protracted warfare one, which is a very significant one. He outlined a steady, long-term progression from the very beginnings of guerilla warfare through intensification of that through small unit operations, through larger unit operations to be capped, in his version, by a general

uprising on the part of the population because its sympathy and support had been by that point won by the enemy invader. Of course, this is precisely what Giap and the North Vietnamese thought they were achieving with the Tet Offensives in February of 1968. This was to be the climactic application of General Giap's grand strategy, that they thought they had reached the stage where they had gained sufficiently extensive support among the South Vietnamese population, that if they launched a countrywide military offensive there would be a general uprising of the people against the South Vietnamese government and the Americans. This turned out, of course, to be totally wrong. The strategy was correct, but they applied it at the wrong time.

LC: Yes. It was too early.

JM: That was a major, major military error on their part to apply it at that stage because what they did was to expose the infrastructure of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam pretty completely and with the counter-offensive by our forces and the South Vietnamese, much of that infrastructure was destroyed. The North Vietnamese then were left with doing the job pretty much themselves. So they made a major military mistake, but they achieved a very significant political victory, I think unexpected, because the nature of this surprise offensive itself was so extensive that it turned around political support for the war in the United States. From then on there was steady political gains on the part of the North Vietnamese in the overall political context of the war. They had a military defeat, but an unexpected political victory.

LC: I think you're absolutely right, Joe, that the general counter-offensive, as the terminology is rendered into English is exactly what was expected in 1968, that not only would the Viet Cong or the southern communist military apparatus give its all out nation-wide effort focused on the cities, but that there would be a concomitant urban uprising.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Yes. That's part of the piece that didn't occur.

JM: Exactly. It didn't because a major number of the South Vietnamese had not turned to support of the North Vietnamese communists. They were still violently opposed. I think the events subsequently in '75 helped bear that out also with the great exodus of South Vietnamese after the communists took over, the boat people.

LC: Just as many as had a chance to get out did and gave everything in order to

do so.

JM: Right.

LC: Yeah. Joe, let me ask a little bit about your own observations during 1964. These lead back to your mention of the critical position of Laos. You may recall that in the spring of 1964 there was yet another of the continuing series of coups and coup attempts in Laos.

JM: Yes. Mm-hmm.

LC: Can you say anything about this and its impact on planning in 1964?

JM: Laura, I don't know that I could say a great deal about that. I don't recall anything specifically about the impact of those coup attempts in Washington, but I would say that I don't think they made a tremendous difference in thinking at all in Washington because the decision by Kennedy in 1961 to pursue the neutralization of Laos, and this was at the urging of Harriman, was still the basic decision, the basic position of the U.S. government, even under Johnson, who was then president by '64, as far as the government was concerned. I don't think there was ever any serious consideration given to reversal of that basic position of our government to accept the neutralization of Laos, and not to put ground forces in there.

LC: Was there any thinking do you remember even minority voices talking about reopening the Geneva Conference, either of the Geneva Conferences of '62 or—

JM: No, I don't recall any, Laura. I'll mention a couple of things now which indicate that I don't think there was any hope for anybody who would urge the reconsideration of our policy on Laos at that particular stage. In July of 1964, by which time I had become director of the East Asian Office of Regional Affairs, there passed over my desk the first intelligence report that I had seen indicating that North Vietnamese military were being infiltrated into South Vietnam. Up to that point the infiltration had consisted of South Vietnamese communists who had been taken north in 1954 at the time of the division of Vietnam by the Geneva Accords of '54, these South Vietnamese communists who had been taken north at that time had been thoroughly trained and were re-infiltrated over the years as the cadre for the Viet Cong units, the indigenous Viet Cong of South Vietnam. There had not been any indication up to that point that North Vietnamese were being infiltrated into the South, reason being that the basic political

military strategy of North Vietnam rested on trying to show the world that this was a civil war within South Vietnam, not a military attack by outsiders like North Vietnam against the South Vietnamese. So as long as they had enough southerners to re-infiltrate—and there had been ninety thousand of them taken north in 1954—as long as they had enough of them they didn't infiltrate any North Vietnamese. So when that first intelligence report crossed my desk, and it was not a highly marked urgent intelligence communication, it was in a very routine category, but I did note it. I immediately sent a memorandum to Bill Bundy, my boss, the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, attaching this because I was sure that it had not come to his attention otherwise, saying that this is an extremely significant development because it indicates that North Vietnam is now ready to start sending North Vietnamese military south. This indicated that these were individual fillers, but I indicated that the next step would be sending ever-larger units. Then I recommended on the basis of this intelligence that we set up a military barrier along the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam and across Laos from that point onto Savannakhet on the Mekong River in order to try to effectively repel this big use of North Vietnamese to sustain the war in South Vietnam. I pulled out of a hat and I suggested the use for this purpose of three U.S. divisions in Laos. Not being a military expert, I just pulled it out of a hat. This memorandum came back from Bundy simply with the words "noted" and his initials. I was not in a position at that point because of my credibility within the State Department that had been damaged by the fact that the aftermath of the coup against Vietnam had led to considerable political chaos as you know in South Vietnam so that my credibility was not so great that I could push this view beyond Bundy. So I simply had to accept that. Interestingly, many years later General Abrams's deputy, another four-star general, General Palmer, wrote a book I think around 1975 called *The Twenty-Five Years War in Vietnam*. I think you may be acquainted with that book.

LC: Yes, I am.

JM: In which he said had we followed this sort of approach to Laos, and I think he used the figure of three divisions, I'm not sure now of that, but he did indicate that we could have been much more effective against the North Vietnamese than pursuing the search-and-destroy policy of General Westmoreland within South Vietnam with fewer

forces than we subsequently committed to Vietnam and lower casualties. I thought that was extremely significant from a military standpoint. Let me add one thing from the political standpoint, Laura. Are you also acquainted with Norman Hannah's *Key to Failure in Vietnam*?

LC: The book, yes. Mm-hmm. You mean, with the reference to Laos?

JM: Yeah. Norm Hannah, whom I've mentioned before in these talks, wrote this book, I think in the early '80s, indicating that as deputy director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, he had pushed a similar thesis within the State Department only to be summoned by Harriman and in effect told, "If you value your career, cease and desist on this." Bill Bundy wrote a—I don't know whether you're acquainted with this, but Bill Bundy wrote a review of Hannah's book for the *Washington Post* in which he said, "I was very surprised at Hannah's recommendation of the action to be taken in Laos. This thought had never to occurred to me or to us in the senior positions. It had never even been considered." Now, I thought that was an awful admission I'd have to make. I sent this memorandum to him, which he obviously had forgotten about, to indicate that higher levels in Washington never even considered, Laura, this kind of action with respect to using U.S. ground forces in Laos. So in answer to the question you just raised, I would say there was no real consideration given to Washington to the effect of those coups in Laos because nobody was facing the issue of reconsidering the spurious neutralization of Laos, unfortunately.

LC: Joe, how quickly did you get the memo back from Bundy? Was it—

JM: Relatively quickly as I recall.

LC: I'm going to go out on a limb and say that your memo is not in *Foreign Relations of the United States*.

JM: No, it is not. I looked for it and it is not there. I'm not too surprised. Incidentally, Laura, I wrote the Historical Division of the State Department at some point, I guess in the 1990s, asking for a copy of that memorandum. I never got any reply.

LC: No reply?

JM: No reply.

LC: Not even an acknowledgement.

JM: Nope. Nothing. Interesting, huh?

LC: Very interesting.

JM: They may not even be able to find it. I don't know.

LC: Let me just clarify that to your memory this was in July of 1964.

JM: I think that is definitely correct. It was in July of 1964.

LC: Joe, do you have a sense of what agency generated the intelligence report?

JM: It was CIA. It was a CIA report.

LC: Do you remember anything about or anything that you can say about the source of the information, for example, aerial photography?

JM: No. I think it was from, I believe from a defector as I recall, Laura. I wouldn't swear to that, but that's as I recall. As I say, it was a very routine CIA report. It was the kind of the most routine nature. It was not the cable kind of thing that we got often enough. This obviously had not been upgraded into high-level consideration in the CIA, either.

LC: Right. Actually it's interesting. The position that you occupied at that time, Regional Affairs director with responsibilities not directly for Vietnam anymore, does suggest that it probably was a lower-level item because higher items you may not have seen.

JM: No. I wasn't seeing the higher-level communications on Vietnam at that point. They were very restricted communications, not at all, Laura.

LC: Very interesting. Joe, I may want to return to this in our next session, but for right now can I ask you to fill in a couple of blanks about your own duties in the Regional Affairs office?

JM: Can we get to that in a moment, Laura?

LC: I'd be happy—yes. Sure.

JM: Maybe we can save that until the next one.

LC: That would be fine.

JM: I thought maybe then we could go into the whole regional affairs question.

LC: Okay, sure.

JM: I just have one other issue with respect to Vietnam that I would like to raise relating to the period before I became the regional director. This relates to a major exercise that was levied upon the lower-level people dealing with Vietnam in May 1964.

I at that point had set up a long-deferred trip to Vietnam. I hadn't been back there since—I guess I hadn't been—no, I hadn't been back I think since my enlightening visit with Krulak in September of '63. In early '65 I began to pursue the idea of making a trip out to Vietnam.

LC: Now, I'm just going to ask for a correction. Is that early '64?

JM: Excuse me, early '64. Yeah. You're right. Excuse me. Sorry.

LC: That's okay.

JM: Early '64 and Bill Sullivan to whom I was reporting was quite willing. I had made all the arrangements, had all the travel arrangements made by May and was about to leave when I got a sudden telephone call from Bill. "You've got to cancel because the White House has just levied on us a major exercise with respect to the secondment of Americans to all levels of the South Vietnamese government. They want a detailed outline of how this could be done." So I remember it was on a Saturday and Sunday. We worked all weekend on this exercise, somewhat similar to what I said I thought we should do after the three generals took over after the coup against Diem in November, but much more extensive, extending right down to the lowest levels in the district in the South Vietnamese government. This was a sudden exercise. I don't know who made the decision in the White House to levy this upon us. I have no idea. We went through all this and nothing at all came of it until, of course, CORDS, the pacification agency of the U.S. government in Vietnam was set up in 1967. Then CORDS actually carried out a remarkably similar, not just exercise, actual assignment of Americans to all government levels in the province and the districts, provinces and the districts. I don't recall that they had many advisors in the central agencies of the U.S. government, but particularly province and district level. These were both military and civilians. I think we talked about this briefly before. I think the maximum number was some six thousand Americans who were assigned to these positions and working extremely closely with the Vietnamese at province and district level, succeeded by 1970 or '71 and rather effectively winning the guerilla aspects of the war in Vietnam. This did not begin to be applied, as I indicated, until 1967 and later this secondment of Americans to these positions, but we had gone through this exercise in May of '64 without any results. So I thought I'd just add that before we got away from the Vietnam picture.

LC: Joe, given your own sense of what might have been useful, let's say, nine months earlier, would it yet have been useful in the middle of 1964 to launch this kind of project?

JM: I would say yes, Laura, it would have been because one of the great deficiencies of all South Vietnamese governments was their lack of effectiveness and efficiency in carrying out decisions that were made. Decisions could be made at the top level, but unless they're carried out nothing is accomplished by them. By assigning people at these lower levels, assigning Americans at these lower levels to work closely with the South Vietnamese, I think this really contributed substantially to the enhancement of the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese government. I think this could have been done probably with not the same results as doing it later because of the political instability of the central government. But things would have been, I think, better than they were without doing it at that stage. So I think it could have been done at that stage.

LC: Joe, you noted that you weren't sure what the origin of this great exercise was. Do you know anything about its fate once the paperwork was produced and the plan was —

JM: No. All I know is that nothing happened. At the level at which I was operating, I know Bill Sullivan knew much more than I did. He had access to many more messages than I did. I'd had access to these messages earlier, but at that stage I didn't have access to a lot of these activities. I don't recall whether I ever discussed with Bill whether he knew what had happened with respect to the papers produced by this exercise or why nothing had happened. Bill, I know, by that time was himself becoming increasingly preoccupied with his future assignment to Vietnam in the summer of '64 as sort of a special assistant to Maxwell Taylor, the ambassador, to supervise the execution of decisions by the ambassador within the whole U.S. agency set-up in Vietnam.

LC: You know, it might occur to someone listening to your description of being pulled off of your trip to produce this paper, or to help produce it certainly, which then seemed to lead nowhere that a reasonable reaction might be at a minimum frustration. I wonder, Joe—I know that you were at this point you're an FSO-1 and you know how the system works and you're a realist certainly. That's very clear from listening to you. Did

you feel at any point here some frustration either because you were no longer directly in the highest level policymaking loop or because the efforts that you were making toward contributing to policy in the way in which you were invited to do so didn't seem to be paying off?

JM: Laura, as I think I've indicated that once this special assistant group with responsibility for Vietnam under Sullivan's overall command attached directly to the secretary's office, once that setup was put into effect, my role had substantially declined. I was increasingly frustrated in both a personal and a career sense, feeling that I was no longer fully occupied or performing according to my grade and what I thought my capacity was. So yes, there certainly was some feeling of frustration, which I think is not unusual within the U.S. government.

LC: I think you're right.

JM: One has to recognize the limitations, I think, which not only career people but even political people may encounter within the U.S. government. You asked me the last time whether Hilsman's decision to resign after he had been passed over with respect to Vietnam and a trip to Cambodia, whether I had ever thought about this in relationship to myself. My answer was that I was not really, from a personal standpoint, in the same position because I didn't have an alternative to go back to. I think career officials, since they've devoted their lives to this and usually don't have an alternative to which to turn, can be even more frustrated than political officials. A political official really feels disillusioned by the administration that he's serving. In most cases, many cases, I don't know whether most is correct, he will have an alternative to turn to. He's come from a legal firm or from a business world or from the academic world. So usually he has the possibility, not a possibility, a probability of being able to go back successfully to that. I suppose one could look in this context of what happened to Walt Rostow. I might mention this, Laura, at this stage.

LC: Sure. Of course.

LC: Rostow, of course, became the national security advisor to President Lyndon Johnson in 1965, I believe, and remained in that position until the end of the Johnson administration. Rostow was a thorough supporter of the war in Vietnam, a hundred percent supporter. Of course, by 1968 his academic colleagues had largely turned against

it. He had come into the government from a position as a very prestigious professor at MIT, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but when the Johnson administration ended and Rostow was in effect thrown on the academic market again, none of the more prestigious institutions in the East would take him because of the his association with the Vietnam War. He went to the University of Texas, as I know you know. Maybe today the University of Texas has much greater prestige than it did then, but that was generally considered, I think, a letdown for Rostow. So not even all high-level officials can return to the same level of life that they previously led.

LC: But as you also mentioned, those who are in the civil service and its various incarnations in the U.S., you're also as you say you're playing a different game. You lived to fight another day is part of that, I'm sure.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, if you don't mind, let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [28] of [57]
Date: October 21, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-first of October 2005. I am in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Building. The ambassador is speaking by telephone from Nevada. Joe, thank you for your time again. I know that you have an addendum that you'd like to make to the discussion in the previous session about General Giap's 1958 book.

Joseph Mendenhall: Yes. We discussed Giap's book *People's War, People's Army* or maybe it was *People's Army, People's War*. I've forgotten which way around it was, but that was the title of his book. I think we noted that in our last talk that Giap's book, which laid out the strategy followed by the North in the war against South Vietnam, laid it out quite publicly and completely, that Giap's book seems to have been by-in-large ignored by those in power in Washington in setting our strategy and course of action. I have been reminded of this in the past week or so by the fact that a letter from number two in al Qaeda to the their commander, so to speak, in Iraq of al Qaeda has laid out their long range strategy. Though I think there's been some attempt to draw attention to that in Washington I think that ought to be highlighted as indicating that we're in for a long, long conflict and that we should pay most attention to what is said in that letter. It reminds me of Giap's book. It reminds me of Hitler's *Mein Kampf,* how the opposition can lay out its broad plan of action to which I think major attention should always be paid in setting out a course of action. That's the main point I wanted to make, how relevant that is to what's happening today with respect to terrorism.

LC: Joe, just to follow up on that, where does that put the American administration in terms of developing a strategy for managing it? Of course, this was a problem in Vietnam as well.

JM: Well, Laura, Bush has tried over the past couple of years to indicate to the public that we are in a long war against terrorism on the part of the radical extremists of Islam. I'm not sure that that message has gotten over to the public in the United States. Certainly when you see some of the reaction in Washington on the part, particularly of

Democrats, to what is happening in Iraq and the constant calls for a plan for withdrawal from there and what is our deadline going to be. This would indicate to me that it's really impossible to set such deadlines when your enemy has a long-range plan to continue to carry on the action against you. I think the administration has tried, but I think it needs to try harder to get across to the public that we're in for the long haul. Just a day or so ago the secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, was questioned vigorously in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about, in effect, "How long are we going to be there and when are we going to get out?" I think she tried in a sense to get this across, but I don't think she referred particularly to this letter, which I think probably would have been helpful at that stage.

LC: Right, because in some sense otherwise it simply looks like you're blustering and avoiding the question when in fact there is a good, as you're pointing out, there is an answer to that line of questioning about "When are we going to get?" out kind of thing.

JM: Right.

LC: Well, Joe, thank you for putting that comparison—

JM: In a current context.

LC: Yes. Yes, and it's useful. It's very useful. Part of what we're trying to do is provide data that will be useful in policy formation as we go forward. Joe, let me refer now to 1964 and to your work in the Regional Office. Can you develop for us a little bit of the architecture within which you worked in that office?

JM: Yes. As I think I indicated, most of the geographic bureaus at that time in mid-'64 were in the process of setting up offices of regional affairs in each of the geographic bureau, which would draw into them all of the individual advisors already on the staff in various fields, individual advisors to the assistant secretary for that geographic area. I'll indicate what our structure was and that will indicate where these advisors were previously. I was named the first director. I had a deputy director who was Philip Manhard. He also was charged with the planning function. There had been for many years a planning advisor to the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, which, particularly under Marshall Green in the late '50s who had occupied that post, was of considerable significance. So the deputy director of the office was also charged with

planning for the future. The second function was the United Nations advisor. That had also been an important position at the staff level in the East Asian Bureau in the late ’50s. As a matter of fact there were two people assigned to that, Ruth Bacon and her assistant, Louise McNutt. By the time we set up the Office of Regional Affairs the staffing was down to one. I’ll go into Louise’s function as we move along here. The third area was political military affairs, including the responsibility in Washington for the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, SEATO, which had been drawn up in the mid-’50s under Secretary Dulles’s impulse, but had never really amounted to anything like nearly as much as NATO did in the European theater. Then the fourth function was the labor advisor. I think each geographic bureau in the State Department also had a labor advisor and that function was also folded into the regional office. So all these individual advisors existed before, but they were amalgamated into one office under a director in the hope that that would to some extent relieve the burden on the assistant secretary of having so many people reporting directly to him. I’m going to discuss a bit the personnel who occupied those positions. Philip Manhard, as I said, was my deputy director. Phil ultimately became quite well known for this reason. After his tour of duty as planning advisor and deputy director to that office, became the provincial senior advisor in the Thua Thien province, which is the province in which Hue in central Vietnam is located. At the time of the Tet Offensive in 1968, Phil was captured by the communists, held prisoner for five years ultimately in Hanoi. He told me subsequently when—I’ll say this. I was sure that Phil was dead because there was no news of him for five years at all. His wife never lost that hope. Nonie came to know her fairly well and she was very interested in the fact that his wife still had hope even though there had been no information for the period of time I’ve indicated. Phil was, of course, finally released when the prisoners of war were handed over to us by Hanoi in 1973. Phil subsequently was named ambassador to Mauritius. I was an ambassador to Madagascar. My wife and I would visit Phil and his wife over in Mauritius. He told me that he was in solitary confinement for five years. He had nothing to occupy him except matches. He kept building structures with matches, to me conditions which would drive almost any sane person out of his mind, but he had retained his equilibrium completely. I think a remarkable tribute to his personal strength and didn’t exhibit any indications that his long

solitary confinement with nothing whatsoever to occupy his time had really affected his mind in any way. I think that is a very remarkable thing to happen to him and the outcome of that. Of course, when he was released it was a great surprise to all of us.

LC: Joe, is Phil still around?

JM: Phil is dead now.

LC: He is dead now?

JM: Yes.

LC: And his wife? Do you know?

JM: Yes. She died, I think, before he did. They are both dead.

LC: What was your impression of him at the time that he worked for you?

JM: Well, Phil was a very gregarious guy. He did a lot of talking. I don't know that there was all that much accomplished. As a matter of fact, I could say that even I as director can't look back on a great deal of accomplishment in the year I was director of that office.

LC: Yes.

JM: As I said, he was planning advisor. Contrary to what the military do, you know, they constantly engage in contingency planning and concrete actions. Dealing in the political realm where the possible actions of I think the full range of the human mind it is much more difficult to come down with any kind of future planning which has any realism devoted to it. I'll mention a thing or two in which we did try to do some planning. We, for example, tried to engage in some planning with respect to the leadership in Indonesia. Sukarno, as you know at that point, was becoming increasingly shrill in his anti-Americanism and was walking all over our ambassador there. We tried to do some thinking with respect to what might happen in Indonesia. At that stage the only person in Indonesian hierarchy who looked at all possible as a replacement for Sukarno was General Nasution, whom incidentally I met and talked to a bit at Jackie Kennedy's tea offered to the foreign dignitaries who came for the Kennedy funeral. Nasution was at the tea and I remember talking to him for a while. I had not met him before. I introduced myself, but I knew him by name. Now I guess the eventual developments in Indonesia show that in fact planning for the future may not even be the best thing in the political realm because when Sukarno was actually

overthrown in ’65 it was not by Nasution, but by a different general whom we had not even heard of in 1963. So that shows you the value. It was certainly just as well we didn’t move in any way on this planning. So planning could possibly be counterproductive in the political realm, as you can see from this example. As I say, I had never heard of Suharto and I don’t remember his name ever coming up in any discussions in 1963. Of course, he led the, very cleverly led the rebellion against Suharto and then was in power for what, oh, thirty years or more in Indonesia.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: For a long time was quite favorably disposed toward the United States. His rise there certainly was a development in our favor. I think I have recommended to you, Laura, in a previous conversation, the book that Marshall Green wrote which indicates—he became ambassador to Indonesia in ’65 and was there when Suharto’s coup took place and how Marshall fought to prevent any U.S. intercession or backing saying that this should be an Indonesian affair without our showing our hand at all. Whereas in Washington the temptation was always, well, we should do something. I commend that book to you. I don’t know whether you have gotten that yet or not.

LC: I have looked at it, but it has been some time since I have, many years in fact.

JM: It’s a very good book I think, particularly on Marshall’s experience in Indonesia.

LC: I hope that we’ll have a chance to talk a little bit about Indonesia when we come to 1965.

JM: Okay.

LC: So we’ll put a marker down for that.

JM: I don’t know that I’m going to be able to contribute much because I was off in Laos when that took place. I was just as surprised as anybody, I think, when it did take place.

LC: Okay. May I ask you one more question about Phil? Did he describe to you after, obviously after his liberation what he felt about the negotiations as he later came to understand them for the release of the POWs (prisoners of war)? Did he have any opinions or observations or anything that you’d like to share?

JM: I don't recall any, Laura, on that point.

LC: Well, he certainly is one of the essentially American heroes overlooked when we talk about the POWs. So I'm glad you've mentioned him.

JM: Shall I move on to the United Nations?

LC: Yes, please. Well, yes. You were discussing other—if you want to discuss the other folks in the office or—

JM: I would like to bring them in if you're interested.

LC: I'm very interested. Yes, sir.

JM: Louise McNutt who occupied that position is an interesting individual in part because of who she was. I believe Louise is now dead also. Louise McNutt was the daughter of Paul McNutt, who in 1940 was governor of Indiana. At the time of the Democratic convention for the nomination of president and vice president in 1940, McNutt was extremely popular with all the delegates. If he had given his assent I think there is little doubt that McNutt would have been nominated as the vice presidential running mate with Roosevelt, but he didn't give the word because he knew—excuse me.

LC: Sure.

JM: Knew that Roosevelt had Henry Wallace in mind and was fighting strongly for that. But had McNutt given the word, not only would he have become the vice president and when Roosevelt died in ['45] he would have become the president instead of Harry Truman because undoubtedly he would have been kept on the ticket in ['44] as vice president had he run in 1940.

LC: Interesting.

JM: So to me that's fascinating that her father could well have been the president of the United States had he given the word.

LC: Do you have any sense of why he was reluctant or—

JM: I think it was loyalty to Roosevelt and the party. He knew Roosevelt wanted somebody else so he did not choose to try to run counter to that.

LC: He stood back. Well, of course, Wallace was then ejected in 1944.

JM: Right.

LC: Soundly ejected.

JM: Let me add something about Louise. Her father was an extremely

handsome man. I think gray hair, but very distinguished and handsome in all pictures, which the public saw. Louise unfortunately suffered from, I think, a glandular defect. She was terribly obese. She never could get rid of it. So the contrast in personal appearance between her and her father was as vast as one could ever see.

LC: Did it impair her work at all?

JM: No. It did not. Louise had been, she had been assistant to Ruth Bacon when there were two people in that office in the late 1950s. Louise knew the work inside out. Louise's great function was to round up the votes each fall when the United Nations general assembly was in session to retain Nationalist China in the China seat as a permanent member of the Security Council. She knew how to do this inside out. We did try to do some planning in that area because we knew that as the United Nations expanded, many new countries became independent and joined the UN. That support for Nationalist China as the representative for China was steadily eroding. At some point we would no longer be able to muster a majority. The only solution that we were able to come up with that offered any hope, but it didn't really offer any on a realistic basis, was two Chinas with both Communist China and Nationalist China in the United Nations. The problem there was that neither Taiwan nor Communist China was prepared to accept this role of two Chinas.

LC: Right. Right.

JM: Both followed a one-China policy at that stage and still do, as a matter of fact, at least in a nominal sense as far as Taiwan is concerned. So I can't say that we could do anything very realistic in the way of planning on this issue. There was just no other alternative which seemed to offer any hope at all. By 1969, I think, Nationalist China was replaced by the Communist Republic of China as the China representative. There had been such long talk about this it was not the political defeat for the United States that it would have been had it suddenly been sprung at the United Nations.

LC: This had been long anticipated.

JM: That's right.

LC: Yeah. Did Louise McNutt hold positions with the Foreign Service outside of Washington?

JM: No. I don't think—Louise was a civil service employee.

LC: Oh, she was civil service. Okay.

JM: Now, the other area one might be interested in with respect to planning for the future was the domestic leadership in Communist China. Well, first the Sino-Soviet split, which was ever increasing in significance as the 1960s unfolded, and the eventual leadership in China when Mao Zedong passed from the scene. Again there didn't seem to be any real hope in—this is '64 and '65—of any development in those two areas which could benefit the United States. I'll explain what I mean by that.

LC: Okay.

JM: As far as the future of the Sino-Soviet split was concerned, the two countries certainly seemed to be tacitly cooperating in their support of communist Hanoi's program to take over South Vietnam. So from that standpoint there didn't seem to be any realistic hope of our trying to use that split to advance our interests as far as the Vietnam War was concerned. It was only until the end of the decade when Mao Zedong, I think, became so concerned about the Soviet threat to China that he began to think about the possibility of opening to the United States and developing a tripartite pattern of U.S., Russia, and China. I'll also raise the point about the future of the domestic leadership. At that stage, as we all know, the Cultural Revolution in China was in full swing, fomented and organized by Mao in order to keep the country in a sense in perpetual turmoil and prevent any real stability that might threaten the communist regime from developing. He in almost all of the '60s continued to manifest the utmost in hostility toward the United States. So they didn't see any chance for an opening in that respect until 1969, as I indicated. Even then it didn't happen quickly, as you know, when it took about three years, I guess, before Nixon and Kissinger were really able to negotiate. I don't think [Mao] was even ready to receive an emissary from us and Mao was prepared to negotiate some kind of relationship with the United States. So again in that area about the future of China as a, the future of the Chinese government and the Sino-Soviet split, there didn't seem to be any real hope in the mid-'60s for the United States in either of those areas.

LC: Was there any sense that during the Cultural Revolution—I mean '65 is when it really starts to become a nationwide movement. Was there any sense on the American side that the military in China might turn against the party and you'd

eventually see civil war?

JM: No. No. No.

LC: Nothing like that?

JM: Mao seemed to be in very thorough control at that stage. Now, moving on to our discussion of the structure of the Office of Regional Affairs, the next area was a political military affairs I've indicated, including responsibility in Washington for SEATO. Now SEATO, as I've already indicated, never really became a treaty organization of any significance like NATO in the European field. By the mid-'60s I think we increasingly recognized that it was making no real—again in this field as far as SEATO was concerned. The main thing that seemed to happen in that area was the continuation of the annual meetings of the SEATO council. SEATO consisted of eight countries, the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Does that add up to eight? That is eight, isn't it, Laura?

LC: I think that's seven. The U.S., U.K.—

JM: I may have missed one. Did I mention France?

LC: Yes, the U.S., U.K., France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and I should know this.

JM: Thailand itself.

LC: Thailand.

JM: Thailand was where the headquarters was located. We'll get later on to the question of the one SEATO council meeting which took place during my tenure as the director of that office. Then finally we had a labor advisor. Each geographic bureau had a labor advisor, I think more as a sop to organize labor and get support for the administration in power than anything else. Some of the incumbents in those positions were Foreign Service personnel. We, however, had a fellow from the labor movement itself, a black fellow, very congenial, easy to work with, by the name of Robinson as I recall. Again, I can't recall anything of great significance that happened in the labor area during the year I was there. In any case, those were the four main functions at that office. I think the upshot of this talk is that in many respects that office did not play a very significant role and I can't assert that it did during the year I was there. The main area of accomplishment was the continued support of the retention of Nationalist China as

the representative of China in the U.N. Even that, of course, by the end of the decade as we've indicated had disappeared. So there's the structure, Laura.

LC: Okay. It's very helpful. In the middle of 1964, of course, the United States was involved in an election campaign. I wonder, Joe, if you can give your views on Senator Goldwater and his general foreign policy orientation and what you think he might have done as president or whether you think he might have been a good president.

JM: Well, Laura, I think this is a difficult one. I had, up to that point, consistently supported the Democratic candidate for president. I was beginning to have my doubts. I was judging mainly from the Vietnam standpoint about the future action of the Democrats, but I decided to support Johnson rather than Goldwater. I don't think that was really wrong. Goldwater, to me, was a very interesting individual, but he had some views which not only domestically, but then in the foreign policy field which I found difficult to accept at that time. For example, he never seemed to be—as a matter of fact, I think he actively opposed economic aid programs abroad.

LC: I think that's right. Yes.

JM: Including, I remember when during the year I was in charge of the Vietnam Bureau in AID for 1969, I at one point tried to make an appointment to see Goldwater to try to talk him into supporting us, but I did not get any positive response from it at all.

LC: Did you get the meeting?

JM: No. I didn't get anything. I didn't even get the meeting. I had known Goldwater very slightly in 1942 at the Army airfield in Arizona. I think we overlapped there only a month or two. He was a very well-known figure in Arizona, coming out of Phoenix where his family had a big department store. He was a captain and I was a brand new second lieutenant. So I don't think I was of any interest whatsoever to him. So all I can say—I'm not sure I ever even talked him. All I can say is that I used to see him around the officer's club from time to time during that month or two. I think I even noted this relationship when I approached his office for an appointment, but it did not elicit any positive response in any respect whatsoever. That's just my personal—as far as foreign policy is concerned, I'm not sure that I would have trusted Goldwater in many areas. Certainly he was a hardliner and I tend to be myself. But there are so many respects in which his line of thinking seemed to develop that I'm not sure I would

have wanted him as president. By 1968, however, I had swung to the support of the Republicans when Nixon was running for president. There I think I hesitated a bit, but I finally voted for Nixon. I think in the foreign policy realm Nixon turned out to be one of the best presidents we've had. What brought him down, of course, was his activities in the domestic field.

LC: Right. I hope to have a chance to talk to you at some length about Nixon's various foreign policy, what I will call achievements and perhaps you'll agree, but I hope we'll have an interesting discussion about both President Nixon and his various advisors including, of course, Dr. Kissinger. What is the mood? Is there any kind of change of mood at all in the State Department when you're on the cusp of a presidential election?

JM: Laura, not that I particularly—nothing had came to my attention particularly in that respect. No, I wouldn't say that there is much effect on the State Department operation during an election campaign, not that I ever noted. I was there during the one in '56, not '60. I was in Vietnam. I was there during the one in '64 and I was there in the one in '68 although I was on loan to AID at that point. I can't say that the thinking was in the State Department and the actions within the State Department are very much affected by the fact that there's an election campaign. Certainly it was true in '64 that Johnson did not want to give any public indication that American ground troops would be involved in South Vietnam. There were many signs of that as you've found from the U.S. *Foreign Relations* volume I'm sure and some books about Johnson himself. There is some effect, I suppose, on fundamental thinking and fundamental policy. I don't think it ever gets discussed widely within the State Department.

LC: Okay. Well, one of the key developments in the weeks leading up to the election, of course—well, actually this is in the months leading up—would have been in August of 1964. Joe, I wonder if you feel that today is the day to talk about the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

JM: Sure. We can talk about it.

LC: Sure. Okay. First of all, can you tell me what you remember about the development of the incidents themselves?

JM: Well, I don't think there was any question at that stage over the fact that they had actually taken place. I don't recall any discussion on the fact of the possibility that some of these could have been played up beyond their real importance. I think we felt at stage that they actually took place based on the information being reported by those involved.

LC: Just to refresh for listeners who might be wondering this, were you aware at that time of the, let's say, the black operations that had been approved along the coast of northern Vietnam?

JM: I think I was familiar in general with the secret actions that were planned against North Vietnam. I recall bombing campaigns. I can't recall specific knowledge on my part of activities along the coast. I'm sure I was aware although at that particular stage in August of '64, I was no longer that deeply involved in Vietnamese affairs that I knew in any detail what was going on at that particular moment.

LC: Do you remember much about the mood in Washington or on the Hill as the president essentially utilized the fact of the incidents to approach Congress for a resolution? Can you recall anything?

JM: I can remember being involved with Bill Bundy at one stage in the drafting of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. I can't remember that I made any contribution to it, but I can see Bundy and myself together, I think, in the operations center when he actually was doing the drafting of the resolution. Whether his text was the final one I don't really know, Laura.

LC: Okay.

JM: But there was, of course, a great deal of activity in the State Department at that stage in terms of drafting the kind of resolution which was felt to be appropriate. It was known, I think, that Johnson wanted one to take advantage of the incidents that had occurred in order to generate public support, congressional and public support for the kind of resolution that would leave the door open for future action by the president without reference to Congress, somewhat similar, I think, to the Iraq resolution of 2002.

LC: Yes, where rather than a declaration of war the Congress simply frees the president from that constraint.

JM: Boy, it's certainly interesting the parallels in history, isn't it?

LC: Yes. That's why it's so much fun to study it, isn't it? Were there repercussions at that UN? Do you remember how this might have affected the U.S. position at the UN at all?

JM: I do not, Laura. I don't think I can make any contribution on that particular point. I can't even remember whether we tried to do anything within the UN at that stage or not. By that time the United Nations had probably—we probably recognized—I'll say this Laura. That it would have been futile to try to do much in the UN because the Russians certainly would have vetoed any positive action with respect to the Vietnam situation.

LC: Certainly at the Security Council they absolutely would have.

JM: The General Assembly was not in session at that point, of course, at least I don't—unless it was a special session. The regular session generally started about mid-September.

LC: That's actually interesting. I had forgotten about that. Another development during this same timeline that I wonder whether it made an impression on you. In retrospect, of course, it seems quite—

JM: Wait a minute, Laura. I'm losing you.

LC: In retrospect it seems quite important. Do you hear me now, Joe?

JM: I think I moved the telephone.

LC: Okay. That is that in October of 1964, the People's Republic of China publicly demonstrated nuclear weapons capability by setting off a shot somewhere in central Asia, Lot Noir, I think. Do you remember that at all, Joe?

JM: I can't say that I do, Laura, but I suppose this was anticipated. I don't recall how much knowledge we had of nuclear developments in China at that point. I can't say that that left any great impression on me at that point.

LC: Let me ask about the election itself. When LBJ was returned as president, what did you foresee for Vietnam policy? I mean, did you think forward as to how things might unfold?

JM: Well, the situation within South Vietnam, the military situation, was sufficiently dire that it seemed to me and I think a lot of people that eventually we would

become involved with ground troops as well as air action. So I'm sure at the time of the election outcome I felt that way, that sooner or later we would be involved. No, I don't think anybody could have predicted exactly when or under what circumstances, but that seemed to be the prospect at that point if we were going to save South Vietnam's independence.

LC: At that point, Joe, what was your thinking about whether the United States should do this or not?

JM: I was all in favor, Laura. I remember being very encouraged by Johnson's actions, starting with aerial bombing I think in February o '65 and then in the summer of '65 with introducing substantial ground forces. I think even before that we sent in some Marines to protect air bases.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: But the step-up in ground forces came during the summer. As a matter of fact, I remember getting this news when I was on vacation and being very elated that Johnson had decided to put in substantial ground forces.

LC: Did you have continuing questions about the governance structure in South Vietnam?

JM: Oh, yeah. At that stage we still did—by '65 there began to be some improvement because the Buddhists had periodically stirred up the kettle in extremely unfortunate ways in South Vietnam following the Diem coup and again in either the late winter or spring of '65 they tried again. It was General Ky, the commander of the air force in, South Vietnamese Air Force, who had the courage to put this down. He was the first one of the leaders after the Diem Coup in October, November of '63 who had the guts to confront the Buddhists and face them down. From then on there were attempts even subsequently to stir up that pot by the Buddhists, but from then on the stability of the South Vietnamese government certainly began to improve.

LC: Okay. Let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [29] of [57]
Date: November 4, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the fourth of November 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. The ambassador is speaking as he usually does from his home in Nevada. Joe, first of all, good morning.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: I appreciate your time, of course. Joe, you and I were just discussing some thoughts that had come to you in our discussions about the situation in [1965] in South Vietnam about what you learned while you were stationed in Saigon.

JM: Yes. My wife and I were very close friends with Madame Le Quang Kim, who was one of the more prominent ladies in Saigon in South Vietnam during the years 1959 to1962 when we were there. We actually became very close to her. I remember one Sunday my wife and I had lunch alone with her in her apartment in downtown Saigon in which she made some very interesting revelations to us about her husband. At the time we knew Madame Kim, she was quite prominent in the women's movement that had been organized by Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, but she was very much an anti-Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu person by the time we talked to her but she realized she couldn't be too vocal about it but she knew us well and she was quite frank in her discussions with us. I remember one very interesting thing psychologically that she discussed about herself. She said when she was very young her mother taught her never to betray her emotions by any facial motion or gestures, to always maintain a calm demeanor and smile if at all possible, which I think is a trait we do tend to associate with Orientals, in particularly with Chinese and Vietnamese. She was quite frank in explaining how she had been thoroughly trained in this question of never revealing to the person you're talking to what your real emotions are.

LC: Interesting. Yes.

JM: That also reminds me of what a Vietnamese couple told us one time about Vietnamese. They said, and I think this is on the basis of our experience very true, that

the Vietnamese personality is so convoluted with circles within circles within circles, that no Vietnamese ever really knows when he's reached the last of those inner circles even among his intimate acquaintances. So that was also, I think, quite revealing to us as to how they assess their own people. I remember also, while we're talking about Chinese, asking a Vietnamese one time, "How do you distinguish so readily a Chinese from a Vietnamese when you both tend to look very much alike?" The answer came, "I can't really give you a very precise answer, but I can always sense it when I'm talking to a Chinese." I thought that was also a rather revealing explanation. He couldn't put it in concrete terms, but they knew immediately. Which we, of course, as Westerners could not. I had considerable trouble distinguishing Vietnamese from Chinese, particularly South Chinese. North Chinese, of course, tend to be a taller people, more strongly featured than the South Chinese who were much more like the Vietnamese. Now back to the—I'm wandering, Laura.

LC: But in a fascinating way.

JM: I will go back to Madame Le Quang Kim. She told us on that particular Sunday about her husband, who was considered part of the intelligentsia in South Vietnam, was known as an anti-communist. At some point in October of 1945 when, as you've just indicated to me, the British were still the occupying power in South Vietnam, the southern part of Vietnam because the French had not yet arrived to take over. She told us that one night in October the Vietnamese Communists decided to try to take over Saigon. They launched a secret offensive purge against the anti-communist Vietnamese intelligentsia. Her husband was seized from their house during this attempt in October of '45 and when we talked to her, which was over fifteen years or more later, she said she never heard another word about him at all. He just simply disappeared into the communist law, which was also an interesting revelation of this communist attempt very early to take over South Vietnam.

LC: Yes.

JM: An attempt which did fail, but although was obviously fatal to a number of people, including her husband.

LC: Did she give you any more information about him, his training? He's a member of the intelligentsia, but what field?

JM: I don't recall, Laura. Although, she probably did. I don't recall. I know about her. She was a pharmacist by training and actually operated a pharmacy in Saigon. Interestingly enough, and I think this derives from the French system, a pharmacist in that system is a much more thoroughly trained person than in our system, a person of very high prestige as high a prestige as a medical doctor. So the pharmacist played a quite prominent role both economically and often politically in Vietnam. That was also another interesting difference from our own American culture that I found.

LC: Very much so. Did she reveal or let you know where she had been trained or how she came to have access?

JM: She may have, Laura. I don't recall where she was trained, whether she had gone to France or whether the French had organized institutions for that kind of training in Saigon by that point. I suspect she had gone to France, but I'm not sure.

LC: Were you and Nonie conversing with her in French?

JM: Yes, right. We always talked to her in French.

LC: How was her French?

JM: Oh, excellent. All educated Vietnamese spoke very good French because their education had been in French.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: Just the same as when we were subsequently in Laos, educated Lao also spoke French. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you when we get to Laos there was only one Lao who spoke English during the time we were there. He's the only one who had been trained in an American institution. With all other Lao one always had to speak French and even when we were in Saigon from '59 to '62 there were relatively few South Vietnamese who spoke English. Of course by the time several years later when hundreds of thousands of American troops were stationed in South Vietnam English eventually began to displace French as the most commonly spoken language there, but certainly not in '59 to '62.

LC: How did you and Nonie come to be friends with her? Do you recall?

JM: Nonie could probably answer that. I can't remember how—

LC: When I start my interview series with Nonie, I shall be sure to ask her.

JM: I don't know how it started, but I know we liked her very much. Actually,

she had a son who was going to school, I think college, in the States. I remember when we—we went back to Washington in ’62. Sometime in ’63 or ’64 he came and spent a weekend with us in Washington and stayed in our house.

LC: Is that right? Where was he going to school? Do you recall?

JM: I think somewhere in New Hampshire. It may have been Dartmouth, but I can’t swear to that, Laura.

LC: Well, it’s a very intriguing connection that you had with her.

JM: She was a fascinating woman. I regarded her very highly, extremely intelligent, quite active politically, but she as I said had to conceal her real views by the time we became very closely acquainted with her.

LC: Had she met and remarried?

JM: No. She had never remarried. She was still a widow.

LC: Well, it’s a sad story, but nonetheless—

JM: Yes. It was a sad story, particularly because obviously she regarded her husband very highly and still missed him after fifteen years or more.

LC: Do you know what became of her?

JM: No. I don’t. She obviously stayed on after the coup against Diem. I don’t know what became of her eventually. Whether she was still alive when the communists took over in ’75, I don’t know. We did lose touch with her eventually after we left Vietnam.

LC: That’s a very interesting story, though. Joe, we were talking about Sino-Vietnamese relations in general before we began the interview session.

JM: Yes.

LC: You offered, perhaps, to present some retrospective assessments and observations.

JM: Yes, particularly as to whether the role which Mao Zedong elected to play on behalf of Communist China during the war in Vietnam really served Chinese communists’ interests in the long run. As you and I know, we learned in the late 1970s that Communist China had sent it claimed up to three hundred thousand of its soldiers into North Vietnam in order to enable the North Vietnamese communist government to make available its own regular forces for a fight against South Vietnam. That was

not knowledge to the U.S. at all during the time of the war in Vietnam. As a matter of fact, when I learned about it from the public statements by high Chinese communist officials in the late ’70s at the time of the Sino-Vietnamese brief war I was very surprised. But you sent me not so long ago some confirmatory information about the fact that there were, I guess, several hundred thousand Chinese communist soldiers actually assigned to North Vietnam temporarily during that period.

LC: Right. That provided, of course, manpower to free North Vietnamese forces to move to the South.

JM: Exactly. The other role, of course, which Communist China played, was to allow its territory and transportation facilities to be used by a country that was increasingly their enemy, the Soviet Union, for the transportation of immense military supplies to North Vietnam. Some of those, I think, were delivered by ship directly to North Vietnamese ports. Some, I think, probably came through Sihanoukville in Cambodia, but I think probably the greatest proportion of them moved through, I would think, the rail system in Communist China down into Vietnam. So those two major contributions by Mao’s communist government to the war in Vietnam, looking back at what eventually happened in relations between the Vietnamese communist regime and Communist China, I think ultimately really failed to serve the interests of Mao and the Chinese communist government. Certainly by 1969, when there was a major threat and actual fighting between the Soviet and Chinese Communist troops on the northern Chinese border, I think that’s what eventually motivated Mao toward acquiescing in an opening to the United States, the one initiated by Nixon and Kissinger. I think that plus the fact that this opening did occur and that as the years went on in the 1970s, by the time our war in South Vietnam was over the North Vietnamese communists became increasingly identified with the Soviet Union and inimical to the Chinese communists. I think already by ’77 and certainly by ’78 Hanoi was persecuting and expelling Chinese who had been resident in Vietnam for a long time. They were expelled mainly to Communist China against the opposition to the consternation of the Chinese communist government. Eventually, of course, war broke out between the two of them, partly because of that and partly because Hanoi had moved quite close to the main Chinese communist enemy, the Soviet Union and in fact reached an agreement which eventually

made the Cam Ranh Bay naval base, the major naval base the U.S. had constructed in South Vietnam, available for use by the Soviets. So that, in effect, China was then really encircled by its enemy the Soviets, both on the north, the west and the south. So that I think that we can say that looked at in historical terms, the role Mao chose to play during the Vietnam War ultimately did not serve Chinese communist interests.

LC: It's an interesting analysis because it opens a window on the period that our discussion of your career has reached, which is late 1964 and early 1965, when the United States actually began to commit forces to the defense of South Vietnam and also to limit its commitments to the defense of South Vietnam. By that I mean decisions were clearly taken that certain targets would not be attacked in North Vietnam. Some of that had to have been informed, and was informed as we know from the documents, by fear that the Korean example from 1950 would play out in Vietnam and that Chinese armed forces would in fact come into the fray on the side of the Vietnamese communists.

JM: Which they did, but we didn't know about it.

LC: Right. That was pretty subtle. That was actually nicely done, I guess, from the point of view of the Chinese.

JM: You know, it's interesting from the standpoint of effectiveness of American intelligence. There have always been and always will be, I think, limitations on the information that our intelligence can acquire and very significant information because we never knew about this at all during that long number of years in which we were engaged in the war in South Vietnam. So it's not just today, but historically in the past and I think will be true in the future. There are real limitations to what intelligence can pick up.

LC: I'm sure that's right. As a general rubric, Joe, during the period of '64, '65 and then your own travels to Laos in the succeeding years, did you have a sense that China under Mao and during the Cultural Revolution was in a position to retaliate if the United States crossed whatever line in the sand existed that intelligence agencies may or may not have known about?

JM: Yeah. I was influenced in my own thinking, of course, by the very fact you just mentioned, our experience in Korea, which when we moved up against the border between North Korea and China brought about the Chinese communist entry and very

vicious fighting in Korea for—well, it went on for about two-and-a-half years before an armistice was finally reached. I myself thought they were, during that time, thought that we should impose limitations on how far we went. I did not think that bombing North Vietnam would bring about Chinese communist entry, but I was concerned that any use of American ground forces in North Vietnam might bring about the same thing that had happened in Korea. I find that interesting because my good friend Bill Sullivan—you've heard me mention him and he'll be mentioned much more when we get to Laos.

LC: Yes.

JM: Bill was ambassador to Laos and subsequently to the Philippines and to Iran. He was ambassador in Iran at the time of the Khomeini takeover from the shah. Bill, in discussions with me, always took the point that he thought that what we should do was to seize with ground forces an enclave in the southern part of North Vietnam, hold that as our negotiating ploy with the North Vietnamese during the years of the war in Vietnam. I never concurred with Bill's view. I think that would have risked the Chinese communists [coming] directly into the conflict. Plus the fact that I think that trying to hold that enclave would have been extremely costly in terms of military casualties. Bill and I never agreed on that point at all. He and I used to—that's when I used to say that we should have established a barrier against North Vietnamese infiltration, not only along the demilitarized zone in Vietnam, but drawing a line directly across Laos to Savannakhet on the Mekong along the old Route 9 so as to try to at least control if we couldn't prevent infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam, not only through the demilitarized zone in North Vietnam, but also all the way down through the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos by establishing this kind of barrier all the way across the southern Laos. He disagreed strongly with my view.

LC: What was his reasoning?

JM: Well, Bill was very closely identified—he'd been in a sense a protégé of Averell Harriman and had actually participated in the Geneva Conference on Laos in '61 and '62. So he had a, I think, pride of authorship in part of the agreement on the neutralization of Laos, by that agreement, an agreement which I think worked seriously against our interests as you know from what I've expressed before.

LC: Yes. So he was from that background opposed to the—

JM: The barrier concept.

LC: Yeah. The blocking action concept. The turmoil in China from late 1964 on, the political turmoil which as you know developed into something of a conflict between the Communist Party and the Communist military, the People's Liberation Army—

JM: Which we didn't know about either, I think. You were thinking—all of it had culminated in the Lin Piao escape by air, what, in '69, I think.

LC: Maybe a little later.

JM: He was about to be liquidated by Mao.

LC: Right. Right.

JM: Yeah. I don't think we knew—I think we may have had some suspicion, but I don't think we had any real confirmation of that, did we?

LC: Probably not, not that I've seen in contemporary documents from that time.

JM: Right.

LC: But your comments make me wonder whether you thought not only in strategic terms about the problem of the Korean example, but also in American terms whether this was something of a shadow cast over the Democratic Party and the Democratic president, whether President Johnson felt particularly belabored by what had happened in President Truman's day, not only the "loss of China," quote unquote, but also the Korean War. Do you think just in your reading or your ruminating about that period and about Johnson that he had thoughts along those lines? Of course, he was a congressman at that time and certainly an ambitious one.

JM: Yeah. I think certainly his thinking was influenced by what had happened then, but I didn't sense at the time and nothing I have seen since indicated that this view was confined to the Democratic Party. I think this was the view generally felt by Americans because of the Korean experience, that it was not particularly a difference between the Democrats and the Republicans that I recall at that time.

LC: Well, Joe, picking up the story of your experiences, we talked last time about the Gulf of Tonkin incident. You mentioned in passing that you had, under Bill Bundy or in association with him, helped to try to draft some language that would go from the

executive branch to the Congress in response.

JM: Yes. I can't say I was deeply involved in that, Laura, but I can remember one day when Bundy called me in. I can't remember what the discussion was about, but he was the main drafter, I think, within the State Department. He called me in. I can't remember now exactly what happened, but this was the subject of that meeting with him at the time. This was during or shortly after the Tonkin Gulf incidents, of course, and before the introduction of the final administration proposal into Congress.

LC: About how much time elapsed there? Do you know? It was rather rapid.

JM: I can't recall, Laura, specifically.

LC: We can look.

JM: I don't think a great deal because I think Johnson wanted to capitalize on the severe public reaction in the United States to what the North Vietnamese aggression against our naval forces in order to get this resolution through Congress as quickly as possible.

LC: You also mentioned the outline of the personnel and structure of the East Asian Regional Affairs Office of which you were director. In the notes that you provided me last year you noted that on occasion some Vietnam matters would come up before regional associations with which you had some responsibility.

JM: Yes, Laura. I'm going to get into those today.

LC: Very good.

JM: I have a few, in a sense, odds and ends to discuss with you about my year's directorship of the office of East Asian Regional Affairs. What I'll start with, if it's all right with you, is the final realization of my long delayed trip to Southeast Asia, which occurred in February of 1965. The only time I had been back in Vietnam since my departure in July of 1962 was that hurried thirty-six-hour stay on the presidential mission in September of 1963. In some ways very significant and in some ways it was such a flying experience that I was sort of eager for a somewhat longer trip to Vietnam and also for a general swing through the area, which is what I actually took in February of '65. In many ways my main motivation for that trip at that time was to try to line up people with whom I could work at the proposed Afro-Asian conference in the spring of '65 which I guessed I think very properly would be dominated by both enemies and neutrals,

who were often pro-communist in the public stances they took rather than by friends of ours. I wanted to work with friendly nations from East Asia who would be in attendance there to do what we could. Not to defeat, we realized that was impossible—but to try to tone down any anti-American and anti-South Vietnamese resolution that was put before that Afro-Asian conference. So this was one of my main motivations to establish a working relationship with certain officials as I swung around the Near East. I started in—my first stop was in Japan and I did establish a good working relationship with an official in the foreign office and their diplomatic service, a man as I recall who was slated to go to the Afro-Asian conference in Algiers as a member of the Japanese delegation. I can't even remember his name now, but I think we established a good cordial relationship. That was the main purpose of my stop in Japan. I went on from there, the only visit I ever made to South Korea. There, there was the main purpose of the trip was not appropriate at all because South Korea was not invited, of course, to the Afro-Asian conference, but I did spend a couple of days there. Looking back it was very interesting at least personally useful. I stayed with Phillip Habib, who was then the head of the political section and political counselor in Seoul. My first acquaintanceship with dynamic Phil, who went on, of course, to an extremely distinguished career in the Foreign Service. Later he held the job in Saigon, which I had held, political counselor. Then he was a prominent member of the American team which participated in negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris starting in 1968. He subsequently became ambassador to South Korea and then assistant secretary of state for East Asian Affairs. His career culminated in his service as the undersecretary for political affairs, which was the top-level position which a career Foreign Service officer achieved at that time within the State Department. So Phil had a very successful, distinguished career. He was even chosen after his retirement by President Reagan in, I think, 1983 to assess and negotiate the problem of the U.S. involvement in Lebanon with the Palestinians and the—

LC: The refugee camps?

JM: The refugee camps and that whole episode which finally led, unfortunately of course, to that disastrous attack by terrorists on our Marines in Vietnam. I think we had some 240 casualties as I recall.

LC: Right. It just—

JM: That led Reagan to pull our forces out of Lebanon. He became involved in that at Reagan's request.

LC: Just to very quickly correct that, that was in Beirut, the attack I think that you mentioned on the U.S.

JM: Yeah. Exactly. Did I imply elsewhere?

LC: I think you were thinking so much about Vietnam that you happened to say Vietnam, but just so that no one is—

JM: Certainly in Beirut.

LC: So that no one is confused, but yes. I certainly remember him. I myself remember his appointment to that position as the president's special envoy to—

JM: That's within your period of activities.

LC: Yes.

JM: Active involvement in these things, Laura.

LC: What was your impression of Mr. Habib?

JM: Oh, very favorable, both in a personal sense and in terms of his capability. He obviously had excellent relations with the South Korean officials. As a matter of fact, he asked them and they set up the Korean equivalent of a geisha party for me during one of the few nights I was there.

LC: Really? You have to tell us about that.

JM: Well, it was extremely interesting to me. I think Japanese geisha parties and then this equivalent in South Korea, I think, are often viewed as rather salacious events by many Americans. I think very often they're not, certainly the one in which we were involved was not. The South Korean foreign office arranged this as a dinner party at a public facility, a restaurant. Some very lovely girls were there and were extremely attentive personally, including getting down to the point of using our forks and feeding us.

LC: Goodness.

JM: But interestingly enough at a certain hour somebody gave the signal and all the girls withdrew and went home. That's the—

LC: That's the end of the story.

JM: That was the end of the story. So it's an anti-climactic ending from the

standpoint of what a lot of people expect I think. It was a lovely evening and an excellent dinner and we enjoyed the lovely young ladies very much.

LC: I'm sure. I'm sure. How could you not?

JM: The other night I was there Winthrop Brown, who was our ambassador in South Korea at that point and who had been a deputy commandant of the National War College, the State Department deputy commandant of the National War College during the year I was there, had invited me to dinner at his residence, which I found extremely interesting because the residence was then, and I don't know whatever happened to it, but it was an old Korean house, a very traditional old Korean wooden house and lovely to see. I think even then it was realized that it was in bad physical condition and I think likely to be torn down. It probably was torn down subsequently. But since this was my only visit to South Korea, I do have a good image in mind of what an old traditional South Korean wooden house, I suppose the kind that was lived in by the upper classes of Koreans, was like. Those are the two things that I remember particularly from my South Korean visit, both of which are more personal than official.

LC: Well, you know that those are very welcome. Joe, do you remember where in Seoul this house was located?

JM: No. Laura, I don't know. All I can remember physically about Korea is that this was the dead of winter and South Korea, where it wasn't covered with snow, was extremely brown and rather dull looking as I think a lot of places are in winter. But I didn't become that well acquainted with Seoul that I can really identify that.

LC: I wonder on a policy level whether you have any recollection of discussions emerging at this time, and I know you didn't have primary responsibilities for relations with South Korea, but this may have crossed your desk. Any recollection of discussions about South Korea supporting the United States in South Vietnam, because of course by this time—

JM: No. No. I think this was too early at that point, because at the time I was on this trip was when Johnson first introduced openly and publicly U.S. air power into South Vietnam to launch retaliatory attacks against North Vietnam in North Vietnam itself and assignment of some ground force units to protect our airbases there.

LC: Yes.

JM: So we were not yet deeply involved by any means in the use of military personnel in South Vietnam and I think those negotiations must have come considerably later.

LC: In fact, the timing of your tour with regard to events in Vietnam is extraordinarily interesting because as you note it's just at the cusp of the U.S. becoming more heavily militarily involved and that forms some of the background at least, I'm sure, to what you encountered as your travels continued. So after South Korea, where was your next stop?

JM: Then I stopped in Hong Kong, again partly for personal reasons, to buy suits.

LC: Get some suits made.

JM: Shirts and shoes. At that point I was having suits, shirts, and shoes all made in Hong Kong.

LC: Very nice.

JM: I established that kind of relationship. So I stopped their for both personal reasons and also had an excellent briefing at the consulate general, by the deputy consul general, Allen Whiting, whom I had known in Washington before he was assigned there. He was the head of the Chinese unit in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and had a very good reputation. He gave me a superb briefing on Communist China. I remember Allen was a very, very capable individual, one of our leading analysts on Communist China at that time.

LC: I think Professor Whiting—well, I know this from my own studies—has written one of the most influential and still most important books on the Korean conflict. *China Crosses the Yalu* is the name of the book. I'm sure you're familiar with it. He went on to an academic career after leaving the Foreign Service. I don't know whether you've followed up with him.

JM: No. I didn't. I didn't know what ultimately happened to him.

LC: I think he was a very impressive fellow. Yes. I did hear him lecture once so we have some overlap, Joe. His position was head of the China unit within the consulate general there?

JM: No. He was the deputy consul general. He was number two in the consulate general.

LC: I see.

JM: I can't remember who was—maybe, I don't know whether it was Ed Rice then or not. Marshall Green, who had been consul general in the earlier '60s, obviously had gone back to Washington even by early '64 maybe. As a matter of fact—no I was going to say he and his wife crossed the Pacific with us in 1962 when we left Saigon. He was then consul general, but I think he was just on his way on home leave. So I think it was some months later that he was recalled to Washington and made the deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs. I can't remember whether Rice succeeded him or pre—yeah, Rice succeeded him I think. It must have been Ed Rice who was the consul general then.

LC: I'm not sure.

JM: It probably was because Ed had been the deputy assistant secretary in 1962 when I arrived back in Washington. So he and Marshall probably exchanged jobs. That was probably it.

LC: This position was a very important one in the Foreign Service, to be the consul general in Hong Kong.

JM: At that time I think the consulate general in Hong Kong was certainly the most important one we had anywhere in the world because it was our chief listening post for Communist China where obviously we had no representation at all at that stage. One that probably ranked somewhat with it, but I think still below it was the one in Jerusalem.

LC: Really?

JM: Because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I suppose those were certainly the two most important consulates general politically. I know later when I was a Foreign Service inspector and I inspected the consulate general in Frankfurt, it was then considered the largest consulate general in terms of personnel that we had anywhere. This was the early '70s.

LC: The one in Hong Kong?

JM: Hmm?

LC: The one in Hong Kong was the largest or in—

JM: I think it was larger in terms of personnel than the one in Hong Kong. This

was in the early 1970s.

LC: Okay. Well, that actually makes sense as well. Let me just check. Okay, we can continue now.

JM: Then I went on from Hong Kong to my long-anticipated visit to Saigon. I will say that I was not particularly warmly received by the two top American officials in Saigon, which didn't surprise me. The ambassador was Maxwell Taylor, whose views on Diem in Vietnam and mine had differed very strongly and he knew what mine were. I did make a formal call on him as the ambassador. As I say, I can't say that I was received warmly, but it didn't surprise me.

LC: Who was—

JM: Then the number two in the American embassy was Alex Johnson, who was then the senior Foreign Service officer and I think very admirably had acceded to Lyndon Johnson's request to go out to Saigon as the number two to Maxwell Taylor, which in a sense was certainly not a position commensurate with his rank in the Foreign Service, but Johnson wanted what he considered the strongest possible diplomatic team the United States could send. So he chose, I think, the man who was probably then the most prominent in the military, Maxwell Taylor, as ambassador and the man that's most prominent in the Foreign Service, Alex Johnson, as the ambassador and deputy ambassador in Saigon. Fortunately, the two of them had been personal friends for a long time. They got along extremely well together.

LC: Now, Joe, may I just ask when you say that he was the senior Foreign Service officer, is that a reference to his length of service, his rank?

JM: No. I think in terms of the prestige which he had achieved.

LC: I see.

JM: It was in the State Department and among the Foreign Service. Before he went to Saigon as the deputy ambassador he had been the deputy undersecretary for political affairs, the number four position in the State Department, which at that time was the top-level position to which career officers were appointed by the president. In the sense that he had achieved that status, I think that made him the number one Foreign Service officer.

LC: You mentioned that Ambassador Taylor and he had a longstanding and close

relationship. Do you know something about where that relationship was formed?

JM: No. I can't say that I do, Laura. All I knew was that they had known each other for a long time and were considered good friends. I think they worked extremely amiably together during the year the two of them were in Vietnam. They both arrived both about the same time and left Vietnam both about the same time. They did have that year together there. As I say, I think Johnson certainly showed himself ready to perform whatever he could in whatever sacrifice was required in terms of serving the best interests of the United States when he agreed to President Johnson's request that he go to Saigon in the number two position. As I say, he was not as cool to me as Maxwell Taylor was. I have to say on behalf of both of those officials, that they were extremely preoccupied at the time of my visit both with the question of internal political stability in South Vietnam, which had plagued them during the whole time they were there and was still doing it because of repeated coups and attempted coups on the part of non-communists in the South Vietnamese government. Plus the fact that you and I have just mentioned, this was the very period when President Lyndon Johnson was beginning to make a major policy change in the U.S. military participation in the conflict in Vietnam. So they obviously were extremely preoccupied with things other than Mendenhall's visit.

LC: Well, how long was Mendenhall in Saigon?

JM: I can't remember exactly. I don't know, several days, maybe a week. I do know that I renewed relationships with a lot of old Vietnamese friends while I was there. I remember one dinner that was given for me by Philip and Pauline Tho. I don't know whether I've ever mentioned them before or not.

LC: I think you may have, but if you could, just sketch it in.

JM: Well, Pauline was a member of the National Assembly from the Kien Hoa province, had been for several years. Philip was a dentist. Both had had some time in American institutions, I think Yale, where they had become acquainted with Thomas Dodd. I think he was already senator from Connecticut. I think he was elected in '58. They'd become acquainted with him and remained very close friends of his. I mention that because I do recall that when Nonie and I were back in Washington and Philip came to Washington on a visit—this I think was also sometime in '64—and I

invited Senator Dodd and his chief personal assistant as senator to lunch with Philip and all of them came to our house for lunch that day. Which I thought was also interesting that Dodd had sufficient time to come to lunch at our place with Philip Tho. Philip was also our personal dentist during the years we were in Saigon, but we knew them extremely well. They had a big dinner party for me while I was there. Among the guests was Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen and his wife. Now Tuyen had been the chief of the secret police in Vietnam for much of the period under Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, but had eventually turned against that government and as I recall had to flee to Hong Kong sometime in '63. So despite his past, he managed to survive—a past as chief of the secret police and because he had turned against the regime before it was overthrown he didn't suffer any exclusions from South Vietnam after the generals overthrew Diem. However, he was not in the government at that point. Nonie and I had become acquainted with him and his wife. I think I explained much earlier when we were talking about our service in Vietnam, he was very much the preserve of the chief of the CIA station in Vietnam. So I never tried to cultivate him from a professional standpoint. But through Philip and Pauline Tho, Nonie and I had become acquainted with him and his wife quite well during the final period of our service in Vietnam. So he was at that dinner that evening. He and his wife were extremely amiable as I recall. We still all recalled the personal relationship which had developed during the later months of our stay in Vietnam from '59 to '62.

LC: If I can ask you, Joe, just to clarify the spelling of his name?

JM: It's T-U-Y-E-N. It's Tran, T-R-A-N, Kim, T-U-Y-E-N.

LC: Okay. By what accomplishment was his known as Dr. Tuyen? Do you know?

JM: Laura, I'm not sure I can explain why he was. He was always introduced as Dr. Tuyen. So he had that title. How he got it I can't explain.

LC: Okay. You just went with it, of course.

JM: Oh, sure.

LC: Interesting. I just wondered if you knew anything about his educational background or accomplishments otherwise.

JM: I don't really.

LC: But there he was safely in Saigon in ’65.

JM: That’s right. In ’65, yes.

LC: Were you to see him again?

JM: I don’t think I ever saw him again subsequent to that. One of the things I did professionally while I was in Saigon was to call on Dr. Tran Van Do, who was then the foreign minister, to discuss the upcoming Afro-Asian conference. Since he had been from time to time a badminton colleague while I was stationed in Vietnam, we had a good personal relationship. So I had a very good professional visit with him in 1965 and we agreed to work closely. The man who went to the conference in Algiers on behalf of South Vietnam, the leading man was Dang Duc Khoi who was also an old very close personal friend of ours from our years in Saigon. I’ll get into this later, but when we got to Algiers, Khoi suggested that he could be more effective if he and I were not seen together. I agreed with him completely. So we operated separately, at least during the earlier part of our joint stay in Algiers.

LC: Now what was Dang Duc Khoi’s background? Do you remember?

JM: Well, Khoi, I always considered him and one other guy the leading young Turks in the South Vietnamese government. They were young people who had identified themselves closely with Diem’s government. Both had been appointed to some leading diplomatic positions abroad as young men. They were both back in Saigon when we were stationed there. I became close personal friends with both of them. I can’t recall what official position Khoi held at that point, but Khoi was always extremely active in some way, whatever position he held and always seemed to have a real in with the powers that be in South Vietnam. He also had obviously managed to survive the coup against Diem, which the other young fellow had not. He had made the wrong move late during the Diem regime. I think he was then in the embassy in Washington. I think he stayed in the United States after the successful general’s coup against Vietnam. He never figured again in the activities of the South Vietnamese government whereas Khoi managed the transition very well. I can’t remember exactly how now but he still was just as active when I was there in ’65 on this brief visit as he had been during the years ’59-’62 when I was stationed there. I think one or the other of them had been the chief South Vietnamese representative in

Burma at some point in the late ’50s. I think that was one of the highest official positions they achieved.

LC: Interesting. They sound like a very interesting pair.

JM: Oh, they were. They were an extremely interesting pair. As a matter of fact, Khoi married a daughter of Tran Van Lam. Now Tran Van Lam I also knew well when I was stationed in Saigon. He was a member of the National Assembly at that point. Tran Van Lam became the last foreign minister of the South Vietnamese government. He was foreign minister for quite a number of years and he and his family escaped to Australia when the communists took over, but Khoi in 1964 had married one of his daughters in Washington. I remember Nonie and I were at the wedding reception after his marriage in ’64.

LC: In 1964?

JM: Yes.

LC: Okay. Very interesting.

JM: So these were old personal and very useful both personal and professional relationships.

LC: Absolutely. Did you see the same Saigon that you had seen when you were stationed there?

JM: At that time I would say essentially yes because the overwhelming American presence—as we just indicated we were just on the threshold of it. It had not yet really begun at that stage to any major degree.

LC: Okay.

JM: So Saigon, I think, was not very different at that point from what it had been when we lived there. Subsequently of course it changed immensely.

LC: Absolutely. Well, let’s take a break there, Joe.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [30] of [57]
Date: November 11, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the eleventh of November 2005. I am in Lubbock, Texas. The ambassador is in Nevada speaking to me by telephone. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, last time we were discussing stops on your tour in the early part of 1965 preparatory to the development obviously of U.S. policy with regard to the Afro-Asian conference that was upcoming at that time and would be scheduled in Algiers. You had described in some detail observations you made during your stop in Saigon. I wonder if you can continue with that.

JM: Yes, I'd be glad to, Laura. Not directly relevant to my visit, I would like to raise a couple of events that began to—the first of which occurred shortly after my visit and the other a bit later. These were linked to Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, who was the head of the Vietnamese Air Force. In March of '65 as I recall the date, the Buddhist radicals, who as you know over most of the past two years had created considerable political instability by their actions in South Vietnam, were again fomenting this kind of activity and threatening a new coup and so forth. This time, Marshal Ky, who I believe was the vice-president by that point—I'm not absolutely sure of that—but anyway, he initiated action against the Buddhists, brought them under control, the first really, in my view, effective action against the Buddhists in, oh, at least a year-and-a-half since the coup against Diem in October and November of 1963. From then on the Buddhists no longer presented the kind of problem to political stability within South Vietnam which they had been fomenting during the past year-and-a-half. So I give Ky very considerable credit for his successful action in bringing him under control. I think one of the people he had to deal with was—I'm not sure I can remember the name. He was the colonel who had led the coup attempt in November 1960 against Diem, the unsuccessful attempt, who later aligned himself closely with the Buddhists and participated in some of their disruptive activities. Ky had the courage to oppose not just

the Buddhists, but this colonel and bring that situation under better control than it had been for a long time. The other action that Ky subsequently took which I would like to mention, is that when the presidential elections began to be discussed in 1966—I think they were actually held in '67—it looked as though Ky was going to challenge the president, Nguyen Van Thieu, for the presidency. The threat there was that the South Vietnamese military would divide politically and again create an unstable situation within South Vietnam rather than increase concentration on the war against the communists, instead this kind of intermeshing activity among the anti-communists in Vietnam. Ultimately, Ky decided not to run against Thieu, but to accept the nomination for vice presidency. Again, I give Ky very considerable credit for that. I want to mention both of these things because Ky has been a man who has been criticized a great deal, and to some extent I think justifiably, but in both of these cases I think he exhibited very considerable courage, resoluteness and decisiveness in his actions which ultimately would work to the benefit of South Vietnam. I do think that it was better that Thieu emerged as the president of South Vietnam rather than Ky because Ky was not at all a typical Vietnamese in his conduct. He was much more a flamboyant, Hollywood American type in not only the way he dressed but the way he often conducted himself politically. So that in Vietnamese eyes he did not appear particularly Vietnamese, whereas Thieu was the ultimate Vietnamese in the way he handled himself, secretive, holding things close to his chest, conducting his activities very quietly. I think [Thieu] appealed more to the—his personality and character—appealed more to the Vietnamese than Ky would have done. So I think ultimately, even thought Ky has been the subject of a lot of criticism, I think that there are these two developments very much to his credit in 1965 and 1966. I just liked to mention that, Laura.

LC: I'm glad you did, Joe.

JM: Because he ultimately came to the United States after the communists took over in '75. I believe he's still alive today and I think occasionally this is the subject of press articles. Thieu, of course, went as a refugee to London. He did not come to the United States after the communists took over in '75. I think this is worth getting into the record, Laura.

LC: Well, I agree completely. Joe, did you have personal experience or

observation with Ky at any point during your career?

JM: No. I never personally met Ky. I didn't know either of them when I was in Vietnam. As a matter of fact, I think as I've indicated as political counselor it would have been dangerous to any senior military officer for me to attempt to cultivate them in any way because that would have aroused the suspicions of the Diem-Nhu government and could not only have ended their military careers, but could have been dangerous to them personally. So I deliberately refrained from trying to cultivate military officers. I did meet Thieu much later as president. I'll get to that in 1969 when I can talk about a long conversation I had with him as president.

LC: Okay. Well, very good. I'll make a note. I'm sure it's not something that you'll forget.

JM: I don't think I will.

LC: Very good, Joe. Well, your visit to Saigon during this tour that you were making in 1965 lasted approximately how long, a week or so?

JM: As I recall, Laura. I think it must have been around that. I can't say absolutely. I don't remember precisely.

LC: I had asked you as a kind of closing question last time whether Saigon looked much different to you at this time.

JM: I don't recall that it did, Laura, because as I said the last time the massive American presence did not come about until later. So Saigon, in terms of superficial observation looked very much the same as it had when I served there from '59 to '62.

LC: Were there observations that you made though on the state of U.S.-American relations during that visit?

JM: You mean U.S.-Vietnamese relations?

LC: I'm sorry. Yes, exactly. Yes. That you can offer? What was the relationship like? Of course, Ambassador Taylor was there and you've discussed your differences with him on the issue of Diem at earlier stages, but at this point, and of course the principals in the embassy were very busy, as you've also noted, but in general the relationship between the Vietnamese civilian government and that of the United States at this point—can you describe it or characterize it?

JM: Well, not so much from personal observation at that point, but from general

knowledge.

LC: Yes.

JM: At that particular moment the relationship between our embassy, between the U.S. and the South Vietnamese government, relations were quite good. The one man who had ultimately proven to be a thorn in General Taylor's side much more so—I now know much more so than I realized at the time. I know it from the official *U.S. Foreign Relations* volume on Vietnam. General—I'm slipping.

LC: Is this MACV?

JM: The general who was in power during much of 1964, the one who took over the troops?

LC: General—now, are we talking about the Vietnamese or the United States?

JM: The Vietnamese. The Vietnamese.

LC: General Khanh?

JM: General Khanh.

LC: Nguyen Khanh.

JM: Excuse me, Laura. I'm getting old and names are slipping from me.

LC: No. I don't think so.

JM: Yes, but General Khanh because he had proved, particularly in the latter months of 1964 to be very much a thorn in the side of General Taylor as ambassador, and of the United States. I think he really contributed to the political instability of Vietnam at that stage, disappointingly so in my view. I think the Americans had regarded Khanh fairly highly when he first took over, but he proved to be a real disappointment as a political leader and as the head of the government of South Vietnam. But he still was scheming to try to maintain his power even after others had taken over from him.

LC: You did meet General Khanh on an earlier—

JM: Yes. I knew General—I had met General Khanh when I served in Vietnam because I had to deal with him officially on a matter, as I recall, relating to the International Control Commission established by the Geneva Accords of '54 on Vietnam. I had to go discuss something with him at that time. That was my initial acquaintanceship with him, initial visit officially to his office. I was quite favorably impressed at that time so I was ultimately disappointed in him as well.

LC: Did the disappointment spring from his own actions or lack of actions?

JM: Well, I think both, Laura. Initially I think from his lack of action because he took over in, as I recall, the end of January or early February 1964. In the late summer he had to deal with the Buddhist crisis and again he appeared to be quite irresolute. I guess that's when he really began to show that he was irresolute in terms of actions against those who threatened stability in Vietnam. Plus the fact that a rather hotheaded action he had taken as the head of government had helped to inspire the Buddhists to foment the action against his government. But from then on his capacity as head of the government increasingly appeared to be much less than we had thought earlier, much less than was desirable.

LC: Some who might take a different line would suggest that General Nguyen Khanh wasn't particularly pliable. At least he wasn't toadying up to Ambassador Taylor. Does that sound right? Do you think that General Khanh's calculus—

JM: Well, I think originally relations between Khanh and the U.S. government—if one remembers when McNamara made a visit to Vietnam in March of '64, he gave very high public praise to Khanh in order to try to enhance his support both within Vietnam and in the United States. I think that kind of attitude and relationship between U.S. authorities and Khanh continued for some months, but it began to sour later during the summer and the fall. Certainly, Khanh, who had gotten along so well with the U.S. authorities, including our embassy during the earlier stages, did refuse to knuckle under, but I think he was wrong during these later stages when he manifested this attitude. I think Taylor was right in the way he was trying to handle him because I don't think, I don't think Khanh by that time was really a force for stability within the country by late 1964.

LC: I think that commentary demonstrates how complex the situation is, that it's both positive and potentially negative.

JM: It's a dynamic situation.

LC: Oh, sure.

JM: The circumstances in the relationships don't stay in the same status as events unfold.

LC: Yeah. That's a very good observation to make, Joe. As my dissertation

supervisor told me, often it takes much longer to understand and certainly to write history than it did for it to happen. I think your comment is equally revealing that things don't stay the same from week to week even.

JM: That's right.

LC: Yeah.

JM: Well, as you know, politicians generally say a week is a long time in politics.

LC: Yes, sir. (Laughs) Well, you did mention earlier when we were discussing your trip that you did call on the foreign minister at this time.

JM: Yes.

LC: That your—he had been your old badminton partner.

JM: Well, I had played—I joined during my last year a Vietnamese badminton group every Sunday morning during the latter part of my stay in Saigon. He occasionally joined us and played badminton with us. So I had come to know him personally. Incidentally he was the brother of Tran Van Chuong, the ambassador to Washington. Tran Van Do was a brother of Chuong's, but I had not met Do until I came to Vietnam.

LC: I think, if you can believe it, Joe, the Sunday morning badminton goings on had escaped our notice in our earlier discussions.

JM: Oh, really?

LC: So I wouldn't be upset at all if you recalled how those came to be.

JM: Well, Nonie and I had become quite close friends with Mr. and Mrs. Ung Thi, U-N-G, second word T-H-I. I thought maybe I had described the Ung This in earlier sessions.

LC: That's possible, yes.

JM: Excuse me?

LC: I think you did, yes. I think you talked a little bit about him.

JM: We became quite close personal friends of them. His brother, Ung Ty, T-Y as opposed to T-H-I, had a badminton court at his residence, which was I guess about a half a dozen blocks from our house. I think he suggested that I come play badminton. Thi, T-H-I, suggested I come and play badminton there on Sunday mornings when I

could. Ultimately, I found myself playing every Sunday morning. One of the participants was Dr. Tran Dinh De, who I think by the time he was in the badminton group was minister of health in the Diem government. We had known Dr. and Mrs. De earlier before he became minister and remained very good personal friends with them, exchanging dinners with each other. Incidentally, Dr. Tran Ding De was the leading obstetrician in Saigon. A number of American children, including the last child that Bill and Barbara Colby had, were born under his aegis.

LC: Is that right?

JM: Yes. So this was a very good group. I remember another participant from time to time was a Chinese who owned among other things the floating restaurant on the Saigon River, hooked up permanently I think to the dock. It had become a very popular restaurant. My wife and I went there from time to time. I remember the owner and his wife, when Nonie and I were preparing to leave Saigon, gave a big luncheon for us there, honoring us with quite a number of guests. So we had quite a good group. I think I was usually the only American in this group. I'm not sure there were any other foreigners. I think they were all, all the rest of them were Southern Vietnamese in this group. So we became not only badminton partners—incidentally, Laura, I'm not a sportsman at all. I've never been much good in sports and never won any medals, but when I left this group presented me—and I'm looking at it right now—with a nice silver cup in memory of our times together as badminton pals during, I suppose, about the last year I was in Saigon.

LC: That's wonderful. You're looking at it just now?

JM: I'm looking at it right now as I talk to you.

LC: Did they engrave it for you, Joe?

JM: Yes. It is engraved from the group. Yes.

LC: With all their names as well as your own?

JM: No. Not their names. There's a little plaque underneath. I think it says, "From the Vietnam Badminton Group," or something of that sort.

LC: How wonderful. Well, I'm glad that that surfaced and that I asked you about it. Your trip now continued, I suppose, on from Saigon.

JM: Yes. I went on from there to Bangkok where I established a relationship

with the Thai foreign officer over the forthcoming Afro-Asian conference and then went on from there to Laos on what I had long thought was my first visit to Laos. Then I suddenly remembered in, I think it was probably 1961, I flew up to Laos, probably with our air attaché from Saigon, for just a few hours. I remember talking to and getting briefings from the deputy chief of mission and the political counselor in the embassy in Vientiane during that brief visit and also being driven in a jeep at breakneck pace by the political counselor through Vientiane to have a look at it. Little realizing some years later we would spend three years in what was really a cow town, which I'll describe to you when we get to our assignment to Laos starting in the latter part of '65.

LC: What did it look like to you in 196—during this part of 1965?

JM: Vientiane was never a very impressive place to look at among other things, Laura. The sewage tended to flow in open ditches down the main streets, just to give you an idea.

LC: Well, that gives me a very clear idea.

JM: I will say at this point that our youngest child who was eleven when we arrived in Vientiane and fourteen when we left and she and our middle daughter who was there for two of the three years we were in Laos had become very well acquainted with a lot of Lao boys and used to go with these Lao boys to restaurants downtown. We were never quite sure what they were eating, but I remember one time my wife and I were riding with this probably then thirteen-year-old who as we were riding along said, "Isn't this just a beautiful, wonderful city, Mother?" I've always remembered her reaction to it. It all depends I think upon the personal relations one establishes at a place to how one reacts . One overlooks a lot if that kind of rapport exists.

LC: Oh, sure. Well, I wonder has she ever taken the opportunity to return?

JM: No. She's never been back since we left in '68, but she's the one who is now in retirement in France. I think she still looks back on her three years in Laos as one of the happiest periods in her life because subsequently as a teenager in the States she was extremely unhappy. So Laos stood out as a remarkable exception to her experience in her latter teen period.

LC: Why was she unhappy? Can you say?

JM: Well, Laura, maybe when we get to that we can go into detail, but I think part

of it was the fact that she was a teen, that she'd been extremely popular in Laos, both in Lao and at the American school. She was thrown into a public high school in Virginia when we returned to the States in '68 and was excluded particularly by the in groups and she was extremely unhappy there. At that time she'd gotten rather fat and she was unpopular for that reason. So there were lots of reasons that in some ways are typical teenager, but some because of our own unique experiences that led to a very unhappy teenage period, even into her early twenties.

LC: Well, it's as you say—

JM: But she has turned out to have led a very happy life in later years.

LC: Well, I'm glad for that. Everyone I'm sure who listens will feel a little tug there because those years are always tough.

JM: I think, Laura, the teenage years are probably the most difficult in life because all through the public school years until high school ends I don't think this is so true in college—your peers have no mercy whatsoever on how they treat you. There's no holding back whatsoever. So it can be an extremely difficult period, I think, for any teenager,

LC: I think—

JM: Particularly for one who may not fit quite completely into the group.

LC: There's all of that, but then it also casts an interesting side light on what the families of Foreign Service officers and often military officers have to accept as part of the price, which is the moving around.

JM: Exactly, which can lead to real problems with a lot of children of both Foreign Service officers, I know, and I suspect military officers as well. As a parent one feels very grateful if those years don't leave a permanent mark on the individual.

LC: I'm sure that must be true. Now, Joe, your visit to Vientiane in—

JM: Vientiane. Bill Sullivan, who had been a long personal friend and with whom I had worked with closely for several months in 1964 on Vietnam in Washington was the ambassador then. So I stayed with Bill and his wife, Marie. I was probably there a couple of nights, had a very good time personally. The thing I remember in particular was not especially significant in any official work sense. The air attaché gave a cocktail party while I was there for Jim Thompson, who was an interesting American.

Have I mentioned him previously?

LC: I don't believe so, Joe.

JM: Let me give you a little bit of a history of Jim Thompson.

LC: Okay.

JM: Jim Thompson came from West Chester, Pennsylvania. In the latter years of World War II, he was with OSS (Office of Strategic Services) in Bangkok working in I suppose at least a partially secret capacity. Among other things he became acquainted with the Lao Issara movement. The Lao Issara movement was a group of both communist and non-communist Lao who were seeking the independence of Laos from France. I suppose Thompson must have been the lead CIA man maintaining contact with this group to see what they were up to. In any case, he had this old established relationship with the Lao and particularly with a Lao by the name of Oun Sananikone. Oun came from one of the leading Lao families politically and economically, the Sananikone family. At that time he was much younger and obviously as a younger man I think rebellious against French control of Laos. So he was quite prominent in the Lao Issara movement. The night of this cocktail party given by the air attaché for him in Laos several members of the Sananikone family were at the party. I had never met any of them before. Unfortunately by that time Oun had descended into a pretty permanently semi-drunk status and was no longer very significant politically in Laos, but two other members of his family were very important. The head of the family was Phoui Sananikone, whose name you probably recognize.

LC: Now is it Phoui?

JM: No. In Lao it's pronounced Phoui, P-H-O-U-I. P-H in Vietnamese is like an F and P-H in Lao is like poo-ee.

LC: Like poo-ee.

JM: Not "foo-ee," but "poo-ee." P-H-O-U-I is "poo-ee" and not "foo-ee."

LC: Okay. Phoui Sananikone.

JM: Phoui Sananikone was the head of the family and a very prominent Lao politician. In many ways he and Boun Oum shared the leadership of the right in Laos. Souvanna Phouma was the head of the neutralists and then there were the communists whose nominal head was a half-brother of Souvanna Phouma's, Prince

Souphanouvong. So Phoui was a very important figure and was prime minister for a while. Though he was no longer prime minister at that time nor while I was in Laos, he continued to play a very important position politically. The other brother who was a very significant character was Ngon Sananikone, N-G-O-N. He was younger than Phoui and always acceded to Phoui's predominance politically, but Ngon had also become a very important political figure and member of the National Assembly and minister in many governments. During the three years we were subsequently stationed in Laos we became extremely close both officially and personally with Ngon Sananikone and his wife and often entertained each other in our houses and knew all the members of his family. I think he had nine children as opposed to our three, two of whom were in Laos with us stationed there. The third came for summers. So, we knew that family very well and knew all the members of it, including the head of it, Phoui and Nogn, and we also knew Oun. We knew the brother-in-law, General Kouprasith Abhay, who was one of the leading generals in the Lao army. We also knew the only Lao who spoke English, who was a nephew of the family. I think a sister had married obviously outside the family. This young fellow was the only American-educated Lao. We became very close to him. He was in his early twenties, again both officially and personally. Actually, he and our oldest daughter, Penny, dated each other sometimes when Penny was out there one summer. Penny was quite interested in him at that time.

LC: This young man was educated in the U.S. at some point?

JM: Yes. He went to an American university. I'm not sure I remember which one now. I might just add that after the communists took over in Laos in '75 when all the Sananikones had to flee from the country, this young fellow came to the States with his Lao wife and began to work for the World Bank. I think became a rather important figure in World Bank operations where I think he worked for quite a number of years. I'll just mention that in passing now.

LC: Yes.

JM: But I still remember the Sananikone family were at this party for Jim Thompson. They were there because of the old relationship between Oun and Jim. Now, Jim Thompson had in the meantime in the '50s reestablished the defunct Thai silk industry. It was hand-woven silk, which at one time had been fairly important in

Thailand, but had fallen completely into disuse. I think the [industry lacked] quality controls and what was produced was not of good quality. In the mid-'50s Jim reestablished that industry under firm discipline and opened a retail Thai silk store in Bangkok, patronized greatly by foreign tourists as well as by Thai and single-handedly restored that industry, which became a really significant one in later years. Not only because of his firm, but because of other firms that went into it. So he was very well known in Thailand. Thompson found out that I would be going back through Bangkok. Excuse me, Laura, let me take a sip of water.

LC: Sure.

JM: Thompson found out I was going back through Bangkok. So he asked me whether I would have dinner with him in Bangkok when I went back through and I said, "Certainly." Thompson lived in an old-style Thai wooden house right on the edge of one of the canals or klongs, which were still fairly ubiquitous in Bangkok at that time. Originally Bangkok had been completely a city of canals for transportation, but a number of them even by them had been filled in to provide street transportation. But the one by his house was still very active with commercial traffic moving up and down it all the time. The evening I was there for dinner he and I had dinner by candlelight in his dining room, which opened right out on the klong where we could see what was going on. In this beautiful house, so beautiful with its old Thai furnishings that he had made it available to the American women's group in Bangkok for tour purposes for anybody who wished to go through it at a price so that the American women's group could collect the proceeds for charity. So it was that well known, not only in Bangkok, but the house was becoming increasingly known internationally because of tourist visits. He and I had dinner by candlelight alone that night, a delicious dinner in a unique atmosphere in Bangkok. So that was a wonderful personal experience. I'll add a footnote here, Laura.

LC: Sure.

JM: Two years later, a little over two years later, I think, probably about August 1967, Jim Thompson was on vacation in the Cameron Highlands, the mountains in I think Central Malaya, at a resort hotel. One afternoon he was going out for a walk. He left the hotel, did not return. His disappearance was a great mystery. All kinds of efforts were

made to try to find him or try to find some indication of what happened to him. There were several hypotheses put forward that he might have fallen into a cleft in the mountains in his walk or that he might have been taken by primitive tribesmen and possibly held or killed or that because of his earlier intelligence connection with the Office of Strategic Services and the suspicion that he might still be operating for CIA by some enemy intelligence outfit. But Thompson was never found, no indication of what ever happened him was discovered. To add to this mystery, Laura, a couple of years later his unmarried, wealthy sister who still lived in or near West Chester, Pennsylvania, in a mansion with two excellent watchdogs was discovered murdered. The dogs had evidently created no fuss. There may have been servants somewhere in the house. I'm not sure. She was found murdered. Again, despite intensive investigations no solution to that murder was ever found. So you have in this one family these two great mysteries. Was there any connection between the two? Nobody knows.

LC: That was just a couple of years later?

JM: Yeah, that was in, I think, about 1969. I think it was when we were in the States. That murder got a lot of publicity in the States, partly because of Jim Thompson's reputation and mysterious disappearance. So it's one of the more fascinating mystery developments in or related to Southeast Asia as far as Americans are concerned.

LC: Do you know, Joe, where Thompson was vacationing? You mentioned he was in the mountains.

JM: I do not remember the name of the hotel. It was somewhere in the Cameron Highlands.

LC: Somewhere in the Cameron Highlands?

JM: Yes. I think a fancy hotel probably.

LC: Oh, okay. Well, that's extremely interesting.

JM: Yeah. I thought so. Incidentally, last Sunday I had guests here and I had occasion to recount what I've just told to you. They were sort of fascinated with these developments as well. It's a fascinating mystery, I think.

LC: Very interesting.

JM: Anyway, Laura, after Laos and this dinner as I passed back through

Thailand I think I stopped in Malaya and Manila, although I have no specific recollection at all, but I must have in connection with my mission. The one trip that I, stop that I do remember was Indonesia where, of course, I had no hope of trying to line up any collaborations with the Indonesians under Sukarno as far as the Afro-Asian conference was concerned. But this was my first visit to Jakarta, which I found a sprawling, ugly, uninteresting city. Howard Jones then was still our ambassador to Indonesia. He had been there for about seven years, was still very much pro-Sukarno despite all the humiliations he had been put through by Sukarno. I had a talk with him and it was not very satisfactory because I did not think that we should be putting up with this kind of personal treatment by Sukarno of our ambassador or the kind of official treatment he was meting out to the United States. I've never seen any reason why we should put up with this sort of thing from a foreign leader like Sukarno or Sihanouk.

LC: What kinds of things, Joe, stick out in your mind as being egregious?

JM: Well, Sukarno at public occasions where Jones—he would deliberately turn to insult him in front of other ambassadors for example. All kinds of—even though I think he liked Howard Jones personally because Jones always, despite seven years of this, still was I think favorably disposed towards Sukarno. But Sukarno took advantage of this kind of, I'd call it Uriah Heep approach, to pour scorn on him when he thought it would gain him some points politically in the international arena or in the local one. I hated to see this on the part of Howard Jones because I had known him during my first tour in [Southeast Asian affairs] from '55 to '59 and had a high regard for him at that time. He was first the deputy assistant secretary for Economic Affairs in the East Asian Bureau and then the deputy assistant secretary for political affairs. In both of them I think he handled himself extremely well, but I did not think the same thing of his long tenure as our ambassador there.

LC: Well, Joe, I wonder just if I can ask you a question or two about that. The suggestion is about that Jones and Sukarno were doing this kind of public foxtrot, if you want, because behind the scenes there was a much better relationship that it would have been difficult for the United States, but much more difficult for Sukarno to sustain had there been any kind of public warmth between the two. Does that sound at all—

JM: I never saw any indications that Sukarno was favorably disposed toward the

United States. That this was a public act to cover anything he was doing in our favor.

LC: Okay.

JM: In all my acquaintanceship with East Asia during that period—not that I followed Indonesia that closely—but I never saw any indication of that, Laura, whatsoever, on the contrary.

LC: Okay. I just wanted to run that by you and see what you might think of it. I tend to agree. I suspect that Sukarno was very anxious not to be imposed upon by the United States in any way.

JM: Exactly. He garnered an international reputation because he and Nehru of India and Zhou Enlai, starting with the first Afro-Asian conference in Bandung in 1955, Sukarno certainly emerged on the international scene to a greater extent than he ever had been before. He wanted to maintain this prestige and position in the public arena. It was based partly on his opposition to the United States, his publicly declared opposition which he was constantly flaunting.

LC: Absolutely. This is a slight diversion and I wonder if you'll indulge me in a question about that 1955 conference because it is one of the precursors to the Algiers Conference.

JM: Well, can we hold that again until we get to the Afro-Asian.

LC: Oh, sure. Absolutely. Okay. I will hold my fire.

JM: I think it relates just there.

LC: Very good. Well, you found the city ugly. Did you make any—

JM: The other thing I would like to add, Laura, to this—while I was there an interesting American, whom I will describe, invited me on a Saturday, I think, to come out for lunch to his retreat in the mountains about an hour south of Jakarta. Driving out there after the ugliness of Jakarta, about an hour out of the city we encounter what I think was one of the most beautiful areas of the world because the foothills of the mountains are covered with tea plantations. I think there's little in the world more beautiful than a waving field of tea plants. That whole area was covered with them. That was absolutely gorgeous. This gentleman's house was located in this general area. So it was absolutely beautiful. So it countered my adverse impressions of the city. From then Indonesia occupied a better position in my estimation than just seeing Jakarta would

have given it. Now, let me describe this fellow. He was in the private sector. He was listed as the representative of the Motion Picture Association of America in Indonesia. He had been there for quite a number of years, had developed a rather close relationship with Sukarno. I was warned before I went out there to be on my guard because some Americans thought, and perhaps correctly, that this fellow might be acting as an agent provocateur on behalf of Sukarno to try to smoke out which Americans were opposed to him and which ones were not. Interestingly, during this I think he and I were the only ones at the luncheon he gave for me. We had a lot of drinks beforehand and I noticed that he began to express very—tended to make very adverse comments about Sukarno. Having been forewarned, I refrained from expressing any views pro or con. I sensed that there was some disappointment on this guy's part that despite all the drinks he had supplied me with and the lunch he was giving me, that he was not able to smoke me out on this score. Now maybe I'm being unduly suspicious but I felt that he was really disappointed that the time that he had invested in trying to find out where I stood had proved fruitless, but he wasn't able to garner it at all during his meeting with me, social meeting with me. That was a sort of interesting personal encounter with possibly official overtones.

LC: How, Joe, would you have been forewarned about him?

JM: It had to have been somebody in the embassy. I've forgotten who. I was staying with Ed McMasters who was then the political counselor in Jakarta and later became an ambassador. I think he was ambassador to Indonesia, as I recall. He was ambassador to either there or Malaya. I've forgotten which. Ed was a very, very nice, pleasant guy. I think it was probably he, although I can't swear it, was he who put this bug in my ear to be careful.

LC: Did you say that he was political counselor at this time?

JM: Yes. That's right.

LC: Had you known McMasters before this, Joe?

JM: I think very vaguely I may have met him in Washington. He may have been on one of the desks. He may have been on the Indonesian desk before he went out there. So I may have known him in passing but not closely.

LC: Well, it sounds as if it was an interesting lunch.

JM: It was an interesting lunch. I also remember I had lunch with the deputy chief of mission, Francis Galbraith, who I know subsequently became an ambassador to Indonesia, a very nice, able fellow. I was favorably impressed with him.

LC: Okay. I was going to ask for any further—

JM: Well, I don't think I have any more observations on Indonesia or on that trip, Laura. I think we've pretty well exhausted that part of my activities in early '65. The next development of any significance as far as I was concerned occurred in early April. George Ball, who was the number two in the State Department, had been designated to go to Paris for a briefing of the NATO ambassadors, ambassadors of the various members of NATO to the NATO organization, on Vietnam and Cyprus. Bill Bundy was supposed to accompany him as well as Phillips Talbot, the assistant secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, but at the last moment Bundy had to drop out. I was asked to fill in for him. As I recall, I don't recall exactly what time we left Washington, but anyway, we arrived in Paris after an overnight flight and were put up, obviously at Ball's instigation, at the very fancy, exclusive Plaza Athénée Hotel, very old-style European. Obviously Ball, who had spent quite a long time in Paris, I think, before he joined the government, knew about this place and maybe had stayed there before. So we were put up there. I think the first thing I wanted to do was sleep when I got there after this short overnight trip over the Atlantic. So I think all of us got some sleep. Then, I think, in the late afternoon had a summon to Ball's room and I found that he, Talbot, and James Greenfield, who was the deputy assistant secretary for public affairs, a political appointee by Kennedy who was quite close to particularly the political senior officials appointed by Kennedy to the State Department, were having dinner together. Ball told me he wanted me to prepare a briefing paper on Vietnam for his use the next morning at the meeting of the NATO ambassadors. Actually, it may have been a higher station than ambassador. I think it was the NATO council. So maybe there were some foreign ministers there as well. I can't recall now. Anyway, I retired to my room. I prepared this paper in my usual rather hawkish fashion on Vietnam to try to convince people that what we were doing was the right thing out there. I took it back to Ball and was told that this was unsatisfactory and to work with his personal assistant who had come over with him on another draft of his paper. So I and—I think a lieutenant colonel or colonel from the

Army who had been designated as the Army representative on the—the Armed Forces, the Department of Defense representative to advise and support Ball on this mission sat by while this young personal whippersnapper dictated a paper on Vietnam. He had worked closely with Ball. So I guess he knew how Ball liked to present things. At that time I did not know at all that Ball was the principal, the highest official within the Kennedy administration who was already arguing for our withdrawal from Vietnam. I think by that time Kennedy had been assassinated. So Johnson was president, but you may recall having seen in *U.S. Foreign Relations*—this I had not learned about until much later, of course, until I looked at that volume—a record of the conversation between Kennedy and Ball when he was the number two, who was arguing then with Kennedy that we should be withdrawing from Vietnam. Kennedy turned to him and in effect said, "You're full of"—I won't use the four-letter word. I don't know if he used that, but he used some epithet against Ball and it was reflected in the *Foreign Relations*. In other words, Kennedy felt that Ball was completely wet on the approach he was taking. As I say, I knew none of this at that time. I now understand why Ball rejected my version. Perhaps he would have anyway, but I now understand the substantive reason because he did not approve of my approach at all. As a matter of fact, the presentation he made the next day to the NATO council was done in a very lackadaisical fashion and very perfunctory from a substantive standpoint, wouldn't have convinced anybody. I now know, of course, the reason he did because he didn't really believe in what we were doing in Vietnam. Actually, I think he should not have been sent on this mission to brief NATO, but in view of his official position as number two in the State Department and so designated. Though I felt personally humiliated at the time that Ball rejected my version and then I just sat around until almost midnight listening to his personal assistant dictate the briefing paper that Ball was going to use. We saw Ball again about midnight. By that time the Army guy and I had had nothing to eat all day. Of course, by that time restaurants were closed so Ball said, "Well, I remember a twenty-four-hour cafe that you can go to," and he gave us the name and address of that. The whole thing I felt rather, by that time a Class I senior Foreign Service officer, I felt rather humiliated by that whole thing and felt that that whole trip was pretty unsatisfactory, as a matter of fact. I don't think Ball, as I say, convinced anybody. Now

as I say, you and I both know the reason why, because Ball's stance ultimately came out.

LC: Yes, absolutely. The dull presentation was part of sabotage in a sense.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Yeah. It sounds like a pretty dismal trip.

JM: Well, it was, it was to me a very unsatisfactory trip. Now the next trip I made was about a month later and related to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, SEATO. This was in May of '65. By that time SEATO had pretty well degenerated. Everybody had recognized it was a pretty ineffectual organization. The protocols of the SEATO treaty relating to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, might have been used by us and occasionally was in public speeches to try to help justify what we were doing in Vietnam, but because none of the other SEATO members like Britain, France, or Pakistan, were lifting a hand to help us in any effective way in Vietnam it was really rather embarrassing to try to refer to the SEATO treaty as support for what we were doing. The only activity of SEATO that still seemed to amount to anything was the annual council meeting of SEATO at the foreign minister level. I think in '65 it was felt that because there would be some attention paid to the fact that this meeting was at the foreign minister level, Rusk himself was going to go to represent the United States. Since the SEATO responsibility at the desk level was within my office of Far Eastern Regional Affairs, I of course had supervised a lot of the preparations from the U.S. end for the meeting and, of course, was part of the delegation to the meeting. At the last minute because of developments in the Dominican Republic, which threatened to throw it into the same camp as Cuba against the U.S., President Johnson asked Dean Rusk to forego going to the SEATO meeting and George Ball went in as our representative. That time I didn't have any particular interaction with Ball, but Bill Bundy was on the delegation. He was because of his position was interposed between me and Ball. I do remember we met and left Washington about 4:00AM on a Sunday morning to fly to London, which was where the SEATO council meeting was being held. We had maybe two or three hours of sleep before. We got on the plane and Bill Bundy asked for the briefing book. We had a pretty massive briefing book for anything that might come up at the meeting. I handed it to Bundy and immediately in his most petulant way he chewed me out because of the size of the thing. "You should have whittled it out and prepared a

smaller version for senior officials." I said, "Well, there's a table of contents there showing all the papers in there. It's very easy to glance at that and whittle out what you may be interested in."

LC: How did that go down?

JM: Well, as I think I've indicated, Bundy and I never got along particularly well personally. Also, we arrived in London in the evening London time and checked into our hotel. Pretty soon I saw Bundy disappearing down a corridor with Graham Martin, our ambassador to Thailand, who was there for the council meeting also. Again, I thought rather excluded from the senior levels. I now know that that probably was not in any way a deliberate exclusion, knowing what I know now about how Graham Martin operated in his close-to-the-vest sort of Vietnamese kind of way. He operated that way as ambassador to Thailand and subsequently as ambassador to Rome and even as ambassador to Vietnam. Graham, who had had some bitter fights with McNamara, the secretary of defense, over military aid to Thailand and had carried his case to President Johnson until he got McNamara overruled. Undoubtedly he had something relating to Thailand to discuss closely with Bundy as the assistant secretary. So I'm sure there was substantive reason for the two of them to go off and talk alone. So I shouldn't have felt the way I did. In any case, I went off utterly alone I think for dinner that night in London. Then the next morning the SEATO council meeting was opened by the British in the Banqueting Room of what is that? It's a famous building. I've forgotten what it's called now, but the Banqueting Room is a very historic room in London, very beautifully—

LC: The Guild Hall?

JM: No, not the Guild Hall. I'll get to that in a moment.

LC: Okay.

JM: This is an official building at the central government. The Guild Hall is a building of the city of London.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: No. This was a—anyway, that's where the session opened. It was opened by Michael Stewart, a Laborite and British foreign minister, a very pleasant gentleman, seemed to be intelligent, but was not particularly impressive in any substantive sense. I

think he was not a really influential figure in what was the Wilson Labor government at that stage, but from our standpoint at least an unobjectionable fellow to be the British foreign minister. He opened the session and then we shifted to another venue for subsequent meetings at the foreign minister level, the substantive meetings of the council. I sat in on them and was very interested in seeing how the various figures at senior level operated. Thanat Khoman was the Thai foreign minister at that point. He was there. I noticed at recesses and intermissions that none of our senior officials and none of the British seemed to be going off to talk to Thanat. He was sort of off in a corner by himself. So I went off and talked to him extensively during the recesses and felt I had established a good personal rapport with him. I had met him very briefly many years before. I don't think he had remembered eight years before when he was ambassador in Washington. Marshal Sarit took over the Thai government by *coup-d-etat*. Walter Robertson, our assistant secretary for East Asian affairs summoned in the Thai ambassador, Thanat Khoman, to sort of protest about this method of taking over a friendly government. I, that weekend, in addition to my other duties, was the Thai desk officer because the Thai desk officer was out of town for the weekend. So I accompanied Thanat to the meeting with Walter Robertson and was the official note taker and drafter of the official record of the meeting. I suspect Thanat had not remembered. But I had a very nice interaction with him at the SEATO council meeting. I liked Thanat personally. He was certainly very well disposed towards the United States and what we were doing in Vietnam. So I felt very comfortable with him. The other person that I particularly recall in action at this meeting was Bhutto, the Pakistani foreign minister. At that time Bhutto was one thousand percent anti-American. He was cultivating very close relations with Mao's Communist China and was well known publicly for his anti-American diatribes. He engaged in the same thing in his official statements at the SEATO council meeting. So I did not like him at all. He was a very able individual, very articulate, spoke extremely well in English and obviously knew what he was about, but I didn't like what he was about. So I was a hundred percent, if not more, opposed to Bhutto as a result of seeing him in action at this session. Later as you know, Bhutto did take over as prime minister in Pakistan, probably about 1970. That would have been five years later. As prime minister by that time, the Pakistani

policy and his policy and attitude toward the United States had very much changed. He was quite well disposed in his public actions during that time. I still remembered, of course, how he conducted himself earlier. We both know what ultimately happened to Bhutto when General Zia took over the Pakistani government in a coup. Bhutto, who was then I think the prime minister, was tried and executed in what was I think really a political trial. So that was the ultimately fate of Bhutto as we know.

LC: And made something obviously of a martyr of him.

JM: Exactly. Of course, it's his daughter who still figures—and who was the later prime minister herself and still figures quite prominently in politics in Pakistan, who is anti-Musharraf, as a lot of politicians are in Pakistan.

LC: Oh, yes. I think if someone went back and did the math they might find out that Ms. Bhutto was attending Oxford at the time of this meeting.

JM: I suspect she was.

LC: I think it's possible. I may be just a little early.

JM: I'm sure she speaks English every bit as well as I do. I've never met her personally.

LC: Yes. She's very—

JM: This is my one observation of Bhutto in action, not at all registered favorably for understandable reasons. Now, Laura, I will like to mention one other thing, which has both official and personal overtones.

LC: Okay.

JM: After the SEATO council session was concluded back at the embassy, Bill Bundy called me in to work with him on the press *communique* that was being issued by the U.S. about the meeting. After that was developed substantively, Bundy turned to me and said, "I am going to the official dinner to be given by the British for the delegates of the meeting at Hampton Court. You stay here and get this typed up and officially released to the press and cabled to Washington," which I did. I was invited also to the dinner. I arrived there I suppose about an hour after the official start of the dinner. When I arrived, of course, everybody else was in the big hall where the dinner was being held. I walked through Hampton Court. This must have been about eight or nine o'clock at night. I walked through room after room of Hampton Court, had been

directed by somebody at the entrance where to go. But room after room of Hampton Court utterly by myself surrounded by the ghosts of history.

LC: Unbelievable.

JM: It was a very interesting personal experience to walk through such a historical building utterly alone with nobody shepherding me whatsoever in dim light at night. The history, of course, of Hampton Court is that it had been built as a very fancy palatial residence by Cardinal Wolsey when he was the chief advisor to King Henry the VIII. Later when Henry the VIII turned against him and demoted Wolsey—I think he eventually executed him.

LC: I think he did. Yes, sir.

JM: Henry the VIII meanwhile had taken over this palace as an official one for the monarch among several others. I walked through this and I finally reached the inner sanctum, a huge room where a very big official dinner was being given. As I walked in people had just sat down to the table. They had just finished their cocktails. I saw a group of people at one table motioning to me as I walked through there to come over and join them. One of the chief people at that table, I think among others who were beckoning to me to come over, was Arnaud de Borchgrave. Now do you know who he is?

LC: No. I do not.

JM: Well, I'll spell his name, A-R-N-A-U-D and then a small D-E, the French, Borchgrave, B-O-R-C-H-G-R-A-V-E. Borchgrave at that time was an editor of *Newsweek*, extremely favorably disposed toward the U.S. policy in Vietnam. I had met him briefly about a year earlier at some session in Washington on Vietnam, which both the press and others were present and had talked to him there. I guess he had remembered me as I had remembered him. So he among others beckoned me and I think I sat beside him at the dinner and had a very pleasant affair. Not much official discussion, but very pleasant indeed. De Borchgrave later became the editor-in-chief of the *Washington Times* after it was established in Washington as a competitor to the *Washington Post* and financed by the Korean religious figure, Reverend Moon, whom I think you've heard of.

LC: Yes.

JM: De Borchgrave was for a number of years the editor of the *Washington Times.* I liked him among other reason for the fact that contrary to many of his media colleagues who were extremely liberal and turned against the Vietnam War, he consistently supported our policy in Vietnam. So I had a very high regard for him personally and managed to enjoy that official dinner very much indeed, partly because of him.

LC: Well, and the surroundings didn't hurt, either.

JM: Not at all. Laura, you brought up the Guild Hall. I should mention the previous evening the city of London had given a reception at the Guild Hall for the SEATO delegates. That also impressed me very greatly personally because as I walked in I was met by a fellow in a huge feathered hat with an ermine cape on who asked who I was and what I was doing officially. Then announced me in stentorian hoist to the whole group of people who were gathered just a bit below having their cocktails at the reception. He did this for everybody who came in, very British in its [atmosphere] and there were lots of senior officials from the—I think they call it the Corporation of London.

LC: The Corporation. Yes, that's right.

JM: Who were present there all dressed in their fancy costumes. The British can do this sort of thing terrifically well with their long traditions and their love of pomp and glamour as you know. So both that reception by the city of London and then the subsequent evening at the Hampton Court as well as the opening session in the Banqueting Room. I wish I could remember the name of this building. It's very close to Number 10 Downing Street. It's famous historically, but the British did all this. They laid it on extremely well even though nothing of any great consequence came out of the SEATO council meeting.

LC: I won't take that as your judgment on British policy generally.

JM: No. It had nothing to do with that, but nothing of great substance would have came out of it.

LC: Right. Right. It was—

JM: It was so formal.

LC: Yes, but a most entertaining trip.

JM: That one I really, really enjoyed. That leads us to the Afro-Asian

conference, Laura, which I think we'll take up the next time.

LC: Which I think we'll do. That's what we'll do, Joe. I'll stop the recording.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [31] of [57]
Date: December 23, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-third of December 2005. I am in Lubbock as usual. The ambassador is speaking by phone from Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, if you would, please continue with the story of your travels in 1965. I believe we were about to embark on the Afro-Asian conference.

JM: That's right. Exactly. The Afro-Asian conference was scheduled to be held in May 1965 in Algiers. This would have been the first one since the first Afro-Asian conference in Bandung in Indonesia in 1955, a meeting which really created quite a splash around the world, particularly through such figures as Nehru of India, Zhou Enlai, the foreign minister of Communist China and, of course, Sukarno. I think Sihanouk was there as well. It got a great deal of publicity about the fact that the meeting was taking place and the radical views that were expressed there. So there was considerable interest around the world in this second one ten years later, scheduled to be held as I indicated in Algiers. The U.S. obviously was not invited to either conference, but it was decided in the State Department that two or three of us would go to Algiers, I from the Bureau of East Asian Affairs and a colleague whom I knew quite well from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. There may have been a third one. I don't really remember whether there was anybody from Africa or not. We realized that operating on the margin that we wouldn't be able to do a great deal, but at least we might be able to in some way influence some of the delegates to try to hold down the tone of any anti-American resolution dealing with Vietnam. At that time of course we were very deeply involved in Vietnam actually. Lyndon Johnson by that point had started to introduce U.S. combat troops into the conflict there.

LC: Yes.

JM: Therefore that was really the number one issue in many ways as far as the Afro-Asians were concerned. So I proceeded by air to Paris to pick up a connecting

flight on to Algiers. When I landed in Paris, of course, in the morning after a night flight I learned that there had been a *coup d'etat* in Algiers. The radical government of Ben Bella, which had been in power since Algeria acquired independence, had been overthrown by an unknown colonel by the name of Boumediene. This threw all the people who were intending to go there into a bit of a dilemma as to whether to proceed or not. I went to our embassy in Paris and got in touch with most of the East Asian countries, which I felt that we stood some chance of getting some opposition to any virulent anti-American resolution at the conference. So I called the Thai embassy, the Lao embassy, the South Vietnamese embassy and I think the Filipino. Interestingly, when I was on the—and I think I indicated in my previous session I had made a swing through Southeast Asia earlier in 1965.

LC: Yes.

JM: In which I had contacted several foreign officers and had developed a relationship with some of the representatives of friendlier countries in East Asia who would be at the conference. I was on the telephone to the Thai embassy talking to the young official whom I had contacted when I was in Bangkok, but all of the sudden the Thai foreign minister came on himself and started talking to me.

LC: Really?

LC: Thanat Khoman, whom I had met briefly in Washington in 1957 and had seen more of at the SEATO conference in London just about a month—SEATO being Southeast Asia Treaty Organization—council meeting in London about a month earlier. He came on, expressing some doubts as to whether we should proceed to Algiers. I said that we didn't know what would happen as far as the conference was concerned. I thought it was better to proceed and do what we could to try to tone down any anti-U.S. resolution with respect to Vietnam. As a matter of fact, he readily agreed and we all proceeded together, I don't think in the same airplane but perhaps it was, and went on to Algiers. When I arrived in Algiers the American ambassador there who was Bill Porter invited another representative from the State Department, the Near Eastern one and myself, to stay at his residence, which was a fascinating one because it was built very much in the grand Arab style, tiled throughout inside, extremely attractive. Porter himself was a remarkable individual. He was an Arabist by career. He'd already

served as ambassador, I think, to some Arab countries prior to his service in Algeria as ambassador there. He was extremely smart, very resourceful, quite experienced, knew just how to handle the Arabs, which turned out to be quite useful because later that day Porter, like all the ambassadors accredited to the Algerian government, was invited to the opening session. He elected to take me along with me him. When we arrived at the conference entrance I was challenged first by—Porter was challenged at the entrance to say that he couldn't take anybody in with him. But he said, "I need an interpreter there." There was this Algerian foreign office representative there and he said, "Well, we know, Mr. Ambassador, that you speak all these languages. You don't need an interpreter at all." At that point Porter just took me by the hand, pulled me through, and we walked right on in. He was to proceed, of course, to an assigned seat and I of course didn't have any and he turned to me in the corridor and said, "Now you're on your own." So I proceeded down the corridor when another Algerian security guard stopped me and was going to oust me from the proceedings. All of a sudden he was diverted to something else so I noticed that and I just walked on down the corridor and ducked into a loge, which had a view, of course, over the main floor where I could see all the proceedings. I was completely alone. I just sat there and I watched the opening of the proceedings. The conference was formally opened, but immediately after the formal opening the Algerian representatives moved to adjourn it to everybody's consternation. I found out that some of our friends from East Asia, including Thanat, the foreign minister, I think were very annoyed by this. They felt it was an affront to their dignity to have to come this far and were thinking of just leaving right away because they were so affronted by it. I urged them, "Maybe it's better to stay around because we don't really know. Maybe this was the ploy of the Algerians to get people like you to leave and then proceed to dominate a unanimously radical conference. He finally agreed, I think, to stay on for a day or so. But as it turned out the conference never did resume at all. There was much puzzlement as to why the Algerians did what they did. I think it probably had nothing to do with the conference itself. Incidentally, the Algerian government had built a conference complex, including villas for all the heads of state and government who were expected, at great expense. So there were immense preparations by the government. So it was very strange they did. There must have been something connected with the

internal politics connected with the coup. That's the only surmise that I can make as to why the Algerians took the step that they did to just close down the meeting the moment it had been formally opened. Anyway, as far as the United States was concerned, that was really the best possible outcome because we certainly would have gotten a pretty critical resolution of the United States involvement in Vietnam. The only thing we could have done was to get our friends to show that it wasn't unanimous by objecting to it. So it was much better from our standpoint that the whole meeting went down the drain. I can't claim any credit for that. None of us who were opposed to the radicals can, but the Algerians certainly served our purpose by doing this. A fascinating outcome, an interesting development in the realm of foreign affairs when sheer luck accomplishes your objective far better than you could yourself.

LC: Did you get to see much of the complex that had been constructed? Can you describe the building?

JM: Not really, just the conference hall. I didn't see any of the rest of it. I will say, Laura, that that evening I went on to the premiere hotel in Algiers, the Hotel—I think the Hotel St. Georges with several friendly delegates from East Asia. We had a marvelous evening there with a grand dinner. The thing I particularly remember is I think it was the first time I think ever drank that excellent French wine, Nuit St. Georges, which was delicious. Incidentally, I just saw the past week I think it's forty dollars a bottle now. But I remember that evening very clearly. Among the guests who were present was my South Vietnamese friend, Dang Duc Khoi. Since I think I've indicated I knew Khoi so well we had a marvelous time together. I think it was clear by the next day that the conference wasn't going to resume. I left Algiers to go back to Washington. Anyway, as it turned out our purpose was served by the way the events transpired.

LC: Did Ambassador Porter tell you anything about what he knew about the coup situation while you were there?

JM: No. I think he was as surprised as any of us.

LC: Really?

JM: As to what happened at the meeting. Maybe he found out sometime later. I don't think that we continued to get copies of cables from our embassy in Algiers to the department. So whether he ever made any subsequent comment on this I don't

know. I will add with respect to Porter, shortly thereafter he was chosen by President Lyndon Johnson to be the deputy ambassador in Saigon, replacing Alex Johnson who was the number one Foreign Service officer. As a matter of fact, Johnson considered the number two position in our embassy as the top-level foreign service position in any embassy abroad. So it was real feather in Porter's cap when he was chosen as number two. So both Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who was the ambassador, and Alex Johnson, the number two under him, but the number one Foreign Service officer in the Foreign Service anywhere, both were leaving in the summer of '65, leaving Saigon. Henry Cabot Lodge had agreed to come back to Saigon as the ambassador and Porter went out as his deputy. So that was a real indication of how high in esteem Porter was in Washington. I will add that in the '70s after Henry Kissinger took over as the secretary of state, I think Porter was then in the number three position in the Department of State, which was the number one Foreign Service officer position.

LC: Which is—

JM: Excuse me?

LC: Which is what, the undersecretary?

JM: Well, the titles have changed, but let's say it was undersecretary for political affairs. Anyway, it was under the secretary and the deputy secretary.

LC: Right.

JM: I never knew what happened, but Porter did not last too long in that job under Kissinger, as I think other people didn't last too long in jobs under Kissinger. I never knew what happened there, but Porter I think retired shortly thereafter. But the same thing happened, I remember, to the director general of the Foreign Service—what was his name, Bill Hall—to whom I think I must give the greatest thanks for my eventual choice as an ambassador to Madagascar in 1972, but Hall also fell afoul of Kissinger and shortly thereafter retired as well. So this fate happened to a number of very capable senior Foreign Service officers under Kissinger who was both dominant and domineering. I have a lot of respect for Kissinger, but I don't think he was the easiest man to get along with, particularly if you differed from him. I think the only man who probably ever got away with differing strongly with Kissinger was Joe Sisco, who I think replaced Porter as the undersecretary for political affairs. Joe was very outspoken and

Kissinger had already known him. So he knew what he was getting when he chose Sisco for that position. Interesting, isn't it, Laura?

LC: Very interesting and something that when we come to talk about those years I hope we'll talk a little bit more about Dr. Kissinger and his impact on U.S. policy in Asia because it certainly was enormous.

JM: Yes. Mm-hmm.

LC: His impact obviously on the Foreign Service is also something we should review. Joe, when you returned to Washington did you have to give any kind of report or was there really nothing to say about Algiers?

JM: I think I sent a cable from Algiers reporting what had happened. There was really very little more to add to that, Laura.

LC: Okay. Were you then confronted in Washington with more of the work in your regional office?

JM: Yeah. I stayed in the Office of Regional Affairs. I'll tell you what. This was the last significant thing in which I was involved in that office. I'll tell you what happened shortly thereafter. The first thing that happened in early July was that I was scheduled for my summer vacation. My family, my wife and three daughters, said, "We've been here in Washington for three years. We want a taste of something foreign." So we got our heads together and we decided that what we could afford was to take the whole family to Quebec for a few days. So that is precisely what we did. We arranged for a hotel reservation in a hotel resort about an hour I think north of Quebec City. With our car we explored that city, which is certainly a very different one from most of them in the Western Hemisphere, a fascinating city, and did some further exploring. So we had a good period there, came back down through New England, had a Chinese dinner in New Hampshire in a restaurant which had just been opened by a young couple from Hong Kong which my family, I think, hadn't had an Asian meal for a long time. So they fully enjoyed that. Then we stopped by Radcliffe and Wellesley because our oldest daughter, Penny, was just undertaking her senior year in high school and would be faced with the choice of college shortly. We wanted to give her a chance to taste those two colleges.

LC: What did she think of them or what did you think of them? Had you been—

JM: Well, I think she was attracted by what she saw because eventually she did go to Radcliffe which shortly after was totally integrated with Harvard. She was in the first class of Radcliffe which received a Harvard degree in 1970 rather than a Radcliffe degree. So she was there at a propitious moment to get her name associated with Harvard.

LC: Good for her.

JM: She still is pretty loyal to Harvard, as a matter of fact. Anyway, Laura, we got back to Washington and my first day back at work I was hit with a bombshell. I was summoned by Bill Bundy, the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, and offered the job as director of the U.S. AID mission in Laos. He said that Bill Sullivan, our ambassador there, had asked for me specifically and Bundy was offering me the job. I said, "Well, I'd like to be able to have twenty-four hours to reflect on it and consult with my family. He agreed to that and I went home and consulted, of course. The real problem was Penny, our oldest daughter was in a private school, but she commuted from home to it. Since the American school in Vientiane in Laos went only through the tenth grade that was totally out. The other option was to put her for a year in the American school in Baguio in the Philippines. That seemed pretty inadvisable for just one year and then she would have to come back to the States. So we approached the school where she was going as a day student to see whether she could become a boarder. It was pretty late in the summer for that, but the school did manage to accommodate her, I think partly because the school principal, an old traditional lady who was very good and very effective called Miss McBride, had asked Nonie a few months earlier when one of her history teachers left in mid-semester whether Nonie would undertake to complete the school year in this teacher's position. Nonie had agreed to do so.

LC: Wonderful.

JM: So I think this helped a good deal in convincing her that she could take Penny as a boarder. So Penny, our oldest daughter, had her last year there. Then as I indicated went on to Radcliffe-Harvard for four years afterwards. It was an Episcopal school in Alexandria, Virginia, which was I don't know, twenty or thirty minutes from where we lived in the Virginia suburbs of Washington.

LC: How many boarders did they have?

JM: I don't really know. It was, I think, related at least informally to an Episcopal boys' school located nearby, at which one of the students at that time was a man by the name of Albert Gore who later became fairly famous in America. As a matter of fact, Gore's wife was in Penny's class and Penny knew her quite well.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: Yeah.

LC: Okay. Did she do okay while you were gone?

JM: Yes. The separation was a wrench for both Nonie and Penny. It would have come a year later when Penny went to college, but this was totally unexpected a year in advance and totally unplanned for. The separation of mothers and children and particularly daughters—and since we have only daughters I know from personal experience what happens there—maybe it is with sons, too, it was a real wrench for both of them to undergo this sudden separation. But it was agreed overnight that the choice was mine. If I wanted the job, go ahead and take it.

LC: Joe, I'm sure that you did want the job, but can you articulate or look back and say why you thought it would be a good thing to do?

JM: Yes, I can, Laura. The U.S. AID mission in Laos was our second biggest in the world, both in terms of the amount of AID money administered and in terms of the number of personnel, the biggest of course being Vietnam next door. So it was a challenging job as far as I was concerned. I had never had anything that big before in my life, particularly from a management standpoint. You never really get anything that big in the Foreign Service as far as a manager is concerned, plus the fact that Laos, being related to Vietnam in the war, would put me back into the center of the major item of U.S. foreign policy involvement at that stage. So I never really hesitated about the job at all. Maybe I should have reflected a bit more because I knew from experience that as far as the Foreign Service was concerned, as soon as the Foreign Service officer was placed on loan to some other outfit, he tended to be downgraded in the Foreign Service estimation when it came to promotions because promotion boards consisted of Foreign Service officers who had spent all their career in traditional Foreign Service positions. I don't think it was meant as discrimination, but it's just that they instinctively felt that any job outside the Foreign Service was not as important and

therefore the officers serving in it shouldn't be rated as highly in their estimation as one who was in a traditional Foreign Service position. But despite that I still have no particular regrets about the job because it did prove along with my assignment in Vietnam from '59 to '62 I would say that those two assignments were by far the most fascinating I had in my Foreign Service career. So I don't really have any regrets, Laura, about having made the decision.

LC: You came into work the next day and did you have a chance to talk with Bill Bundy?

JM: Oh, yeah. I went and immediately told him that I would accept. Bill Sullivan, in the meantime, wanted it made clear to me that because of an executive order issued by the president the number two in the embassy, the deputy chief of mission, whom I outranked as a Foreign Service officer, would because of this executive order be superior to me. That is, I would fall under the jurisdiction of both the ambassador and the deputy chief of mission. I decided that didn't really matter. As a matter of fact, during my three years in Laos, Bill Sullivan, the ambassador, and I always dealt directly with each other. I scarcely ever dealt with the deputy chief of mission. So that was simply on paper that he was a superior, but Bill and I always worked together on anything that arose between the embassy and the AID mission.

LC: Who was the DCM?

JM: Originally it was Emory Swank, an officer who had entered the Foreign Service, interestingly, in 1946 in the very same class I did. At that time classes were entering every two weeks into the Foreign Service because there had been no entrance for four to five years during the war. So veterans had taken the first Foreign Service examination in November of '45 and by the summer of '46 the State Department was inducting the ones chosen as Foreign Service officers as a result of the written and oral tests every two weeks in the phased programs. I think I indicated much earlier we had a month's orientation before assignment abroad.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: So Swank and I were in that same class. He, however, had been promoted to Class I officer three years after I was. I was promoted in '64. As a matter of fact, I think in '65 he was still a Class II officer and was promoted in '67. So I did outrank him in

terms of Foreign Service officer rank, but it didn't really matter. He and I never really had any problems at all. He was succeeded by—I can't think of the name of the guy now. I see his face and I can't think. His successor proved to be much more jealous of me, which had some repercussions later. Incidentally, his successor later became ambassador, I think, to the Dominican Republic. While he was there somehow he used employees of the embassy to some degree and I guess some embassy material resources in construction of a vacation house and later left the Foreign Service in disgrace.

LC: Uh-oh.

JM: I'm trying to think of it. Well, the name will come to me. I'll tell you in a subsequent time, Laura.

LC: Sure. Okay.

JM: Anyway, he and I didn't get along really as well as I did with Swank because of the jealousy of the latter. I had been in Laos much longer than he had. I had all kinds of contacts with the top-level ministers in the government, which he didn't really have, particularly at that early stage. He took over I think in '67. So that was not as a happy a relationship as the one had been with Swank earlier.

LC: Joe, can you tell me a little bit about packing up and leaving Washington?

JM: Sure. First, I think the next think I want to mention, Laura, is that my appointment as director of the U.S. AID mission in Laos was made by the White House itself. Lyndon Johnson insisted that all these appointments, not only of ambassadors, but of AID mission directors, be made by the White House in his name. I was warned before the White House announcement of my appointment not to indicate to anybody that I had been selected as the AID mission director because if the word leaked to the press Lyndon Johnson had been known to change his mind about the appointment simply because of the leak to the press, which he regarded I guess as a presumption on his authority. It changed the nomination of the poor fellow. My appointment was actually announced by the press itself—by the White House itself. Interestingly, I received a number of letters of congratulations, including one from Hubert Humphrey, who was the vice president. I had never had any contact with Humphrey at that stage. I didn't know him at all. I was surprised that he sent me a letter of congratulations. I can only figure that he thought he might be later running for president and was trying to build up some

support. I don't know any other reason why he would have done it.

LC: Was it your sense in Washington at that time that he was very much on the sidelines?

JM: Well, I don't think I had enough inner feeling with respect to what was going on at the top in the White House except that I think anybody who dealt with Lyndon Johnson, I think, would have known that he ran his show very much himself. So that his vice president was not likely to be a figure of great consequence in his administration.

LC: Do you still have your letter from Hubert Humphrey?

JM: Oh, yes. I kept that as a matter of fact, Laura.

LC: I'm sure you did.

JM: I was sworn in in a ceremony at AID headquarters in Washington, sworn in by Rutherford Poats, who was the assistant administrator in the AID agency for East Asia. Among the people attending the swearing in were the head of the AID agency, who was Dave Bell at that point. Bill Bundy came over for the swearing in, too, and a number of other figures. So it was a pretty elaborate swearing in ceremony.

LC: Joe, it might be helpful for listeners to know something about the structure of AID and something about its origins, if you could kind of give a sketch of that.

JM: A U.S. AID agency—and I speak of A-I-D now because it was the Agency for International Development, but it wasn't always called that. The United States established its first aid agency in small letters, A-I-D, in 1947 at the time that the Marshall Plan was initiated. It was then called the Economic Cooperation Administration and the head of that was Paul Hoffman, who had been head of one of the major American car manufacturers at that stage, Studebakers. Studebaker I think has now disappeared completely, but it was very well known then. Hoffman was extremely highly regarded. This was the—the Marshall Plan was the aid program established to assist in the recovery of European countries from the devastation of World War II. The Economic Cooperation Administration also established a regional office for all of Europe in Paris. The head of that was Averell Harriman. So you can see that two absolutely top-notch, well known figures were chosen for these two top positions in the Economic Cooperation Administration. In, I think, it was 1952 the name of that aid

agency was changed to the Mutual Security Administration. I think it underwent another change in name in the late ’50s, but by the early ’60s had become the Agency for International Development. That agency was headed by an administrator who was a presidential appointee. He occupied a position in the State Department hierarchy that was equivalent to the number two, the deputy secretary. In other words, he fell under the overall authority of the secretary of state, but the moment you got underneath the secretary of state he had a completely separate administration.

LC: Okay.

JM: The agency was organized into several different bureaus, just as the State Department was. The four or five most important being the bureaus for the various geographic areas of the world, each headed by an assistant administrator. There as a bureau for East Asian Affairs, East Asian countries, one for Near Eastern countries, which included India, one for Latin American countries and one for Africa. I think there were just four at that stage because by the early ’60s of course there had not been an aid program for quite a long time for Europe. None was required. So I think there were four regional bureaus plus, plus as in the State Department, several functional bureaus. That in general is the organizational set-up of the AID agency. As I said, the head of the Bureau of East Asian Affairs was the one who swore me in. Dave Bell, who was the top official in the Agency for International Development was also there for the swearing in, a very effective and very nice fellow incidentally, and extremely tall. I mention this because Dave Bell, though he occupied a very senior position and was well over six feet tall, always insisted on traveling tourist class, not first class. So that sort of handicapped AID mission directors in their travel, which affected me as well. I always resented a little bit that I traveled tourist class whereas the U.S. the financial support in every respect of the Lao government was financing Lao ministers who would travel first class. That left a bit of a bad taste, but there was nothing I could do about it.

LC: How well connected were you over there with folks in this separate administration, in the AID administration? How much—

JM: I had met Poats, dealt with him, and probably even fought with him a bit over Vietnam matters.

LC: Tell me a little bit about him. First, how do you spell his name?

JM: Excuse me?

LC: How do you spell his last name?

JM: P-O-A-T-S. Poats had been, in the ’50s, a foreign correspondent I think for UPI (United Press International) and had been taken into the AID administration I think sometime—I don’t know whether he entered in the late ’50s or in the ’60s. But he proved to be an extremely able individual and had moved up as I’ve indicated to the top level position in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs in AID. As a matter of fact, later took over as the number two official in AID in 1968, I believe it was. It may have been ’67. So he was an extremely able, highly regarded individual. I knew him slightly. I came to know him much better, of course. I developed a very high regard for him when I was working closely with him. I think he felt the same way about me. So we had a very cordial relationship when I, in a sense, was working for him. He was also a very capable number two official in the AID agency later, which affected me because I was also in a position in AID Washington under him, too. So I came to know—his nickname was “Rud”—I came to know Rud Rutherford Poats extremely well. Dave Bell, the AID administrator—administrator was his title—I think came from the private sector and subsequently went back into the private sector. He also was a very highly-regarded official in Washington and also a very capable individual. I mention this because I think some of the heads of the AID agency were not nearly as well regarded as he was. Again I always had very, very fine relations with him. I will mention since we’re talking about him, a very anomalous photograph, which I have. As I indicate, Bell I think was about six-feet-six when he made a visit to Laos while I was there. We were inaugurating a bridge over a river I’d say maybe a hundred kilometers, sixty miles north of Vientiane. Since Bell was there I had him take over for me together with the Lao minister opening the bridge. I have this photograph of him with another Lao minister, extremely short, walking across this bridge. If there’s ever a Mutt and Jeff—it’s a wonderful photograph in that sense. This extremely tall American and this tiny Lao. This tiny Lao was a very voluble talker and he was vigorously talking to Bell as they crossed the bridge.

LC: But that is pretty funny.

JM: Laura, we actually left Washington about a month after my appointment. In

early September we got Penny into the school. We left, flew to Los Angeles and changed planes there, but did not stop over, went on to Honolulu where I was briefed by the U.S. commander-in-chief of the Pacific. I'll explain why. The AID mission in Laos administered not only the economic aid program, but our military aid program to Laos, which at that point was about 150 million dollars a year and fifty million in economic aid. The reason that the AID mission administered it was because of the Geneva Accords of 1962 on Laos, which prohibited any American military personnel from being assigned to Laos other then defense attaché in the embassy. So normally the military aid program is administered in a foreign country by a military assistance advisory group which consists of officers and enlisted men of the armed forces, but that could not be done in Laos because of these accords. It had been decided that the military aid program would be administered by the AID mission through a division of the AID mission, which was called the Requirements Division, sort of a euphemism for the administration of the military aid program. That division was manned by retired military personnel. These people were actually retired. They were not what is known as sheep-dipped, retired as far as the public was concerned, but not actually retired. All the officers, I think, there were somewhere between a dozen and two dozen of them were actually retired from the military. They administered the military aid program. There was also an aid group stationed in Bangkok which was headed and staffed by military personnel. As a matter of fact, the head of it during most of the time I was in Laos was a fellow graduate of the National War College in the class of 1963 with me. So I had known him, too. All of the communications between our requirements division and the U.S. headquarters in Honolulu, which was still in charge of all the aid programs throughout Asia, passed through this office in Bangkok. I've always felt that that office really served no very important purpose. All I think it ever did was to pass on the communications from us to rubber stamp and pass them on to Honolulu. Then the instructions came back via that office. Why we had to have that I don't know. I never saw any real purpose served by it, but that was the organization I inherited. Since it was really outside my jurisdiction what the military had in Bangkok I couldn't very well object to it. In any case, Laura, I will say with respect to the military aid program while we're talking about it, Bill Sullivan, the ambassador, played a very active role in all U.S.

military activities in Laos because those activities were coordinated by the defense attaché under his jurisdiction. So the actual military operations—and we couldn't conduct them openly. They had to be conducted secretly. The military operations were very tightly controlled by the ambassador who never permitted American military personnel in uniform to enter Laos, never. He would always refuse that permission because of the Geneva Accords. He took a very active role in the aid program as well. As a matter of fact, I often, I think at least once or twice a week or perhaps even more often, took with me to the morning staff meeting presided over by the ambassador of all the heads of U.S. agencies operating in Laos, I took with me the head of the Requirements Division. So the ambassador and he could communicate directly. As a matter of fact, I didn't play a particularly active role in the administration of that program. I chose to do it that way since the ambassador wanted to play a major hand in that. I chose also because I was a little afraid that there might be some hidden bombshell in that program which could get me into trouble with Congress and Washington. So I kept my hand restrained as far as the military aid program was concerned but I was, as I shall tell you in subsequent talks, extremely active in the administration of the economic aid program. But I thought I just might make that clear at this point, that I didn't become deeply involved in the military aid program.

LC: It seems that it wasn't necessary that you do that. There wasn't a missing link because you absented yourself slightly from this.

JM: No. There were already so many hands involved, the ambassador, the defense attaché, our Requirements Division, this office in Bangkok, and CINCPAC, the commander-in-chief of the Pacific in Honolulu. That was enough hands.

LC: Yeah. What about on the AID side? What was the reporting line like?

JM: Well, the telegrams from the AID mission all went out over the ambassador's signature. I often could authorize their sending myself, but if it was extremely important I would let them go over to Bill Sullivan. As far as Washington was concerned telegrams arrived from Sullivan rather than from me. If I had a particular message that I wanted to get through to Washington and let them know if was from me I would just insert at the top of the telegram, "From Mendenhall." Then they knew it was mine and not Bill Sullivan's. As far as the economic aid program was concerned, Bill let

me run the show pretty much on my own. He remained informed, of course. He saw all significant telegrams, but we never had any really major differences over the program except one which I'll get to much later. That had to do not with the substance of the AID program, but with personnel in our AID mission. I'll just say at this point we had the first strike in the history of Laos when Lao employees of the AID mission decided on a strike over salary. I'll go into that much later because it was an interesting episode.

LC: Okay. At this point, Joe, let me ask you about accommodations when you arrived. How did you set up the household? Where were you located?

JM: Laura, let me get us there first.

LC: Sure. Okay. Okay.

JM: We stayed just over one night, probably, in Honolulu. We flew on to Bangkok. In Bangkok we were met by the little executive aircraft which the director of the AID mission in Laos had for his use as well as for use by the Requirements Division for the CIA station chief and others. We were met by this little plane to take my family and me to Laos. I think it was a seven-seater airplane. We were four because we had left Penny in the States, my wife, myself, and the two younger daughters. Something interesting happened, Laura, on the way between Bangkok and Vientiane. I noticed at some point that the door of the airplane had become unlatched and was open a couple of inches. I had just recently seen a movie, which I'm not sure you're familiar with. It was one of the early James Bond movies called *Goldfinger*.

LC: I am familiar with it.

JM: As you remember the climax was that the door of an airplane was open and the villain was sucked out into space and killed and James Bond was saved. Well, this image was very much in my mind and I thought, oh, God, my family and myself are all going to be sucked out of this airplane. I was seated close to the door so I got a hold of the latch to try to hold it and finally the pilot noticed that I was doing this after some time. I couldn't get his attention because of the noise within the airplane. He said, "Don't worry about it because we're not pressurized. So nobody is going to get sucked out." So I relaxed a bit but never totally so I didn't have too easy a time flying from Bangkok to Vientiane.

LC: Well, that just sounds terrible. That's really frightening.

JM: Anyway, when we got to Vientiane, Bill Sullivan, the ambassador, and a lot of other people including a lot from the AID mission were on the tarmac at the airport to greet us.

LC: Wow.

JM: Bill—I think the first thing he broached with me on the way into town was, "I have a house I want you to rent for political reasons. It belongs to the minister of finance, Sisouk na Champassak, a very well-known political figure in Laos, who had built it in order to keep his French wife in Laos—but she left anyway to go back to France. So he wants to rent it, I guess in part to re-coup some of his investment. I want you to take it." Well, I had had some experience—I think I mentioned this earlier—in 1959 just before I went to Saigon and just after where the AID mission director ran into major flak with Congress and Senator Gore, the father of Al Gore, and another senator came out to Vietnam after a week's investigation in Washington, including testimony by the ambassador, the AID mission chief, and the Military Assistance Advisory Group chief all based on allegations made in a newspaper article. These two senators arrived and swore in all the witnesses so that anything that was said that was false one could be accused of perjury. What was eventually found was that the AID mission director had—I mentioned this before—had two refrigerators, no two freezers in his house instead of one because of all the entertaining he had to do. In fact, he had to try to keep some food in these two freezers. That was the only thing that was ever found untoward, but all this investigation was very much in my mind. I didn't want to make a misstep right at the outset in Laos by taking over this very fancy house at the ambassador's request. So I just said to Bill, "Let me think about it." Eventually, as a matter of fact, we did take the house, Laura, because the house which the AID mission director had been living in for several years, which was owned by a member of the Lao National Assembly, was gloomy and dark and Nonie absolutely hated it. So I finally acceded to Bill's request a few weeks later and took over Sisouk's house. I think I did insist upon some reduction in the rental which Sisouk was originally demanding for the house.

LC: Now, he's the minister of finance?

JM: He was the minister of finance, right, and a member of a very prominent

Lao family, the Champassak family in southern Laos. Well, that family was headed by Prince Boun Oum, who was one of the two or three most powerful people in Laos, and another brother—Sisouk was a nephew I think—another brother Prince Boun Om, not to be confused with Prince Boun Oum, was the minister of religious affairs. So Sisouk na Champassak was extremely well connected. As a matter of fact, he was generally thought of at that time as the prospective successor of Souvanna Phouma as prime minister any time Souvanna stepped down. So that's how significant he was politically.

LC: This must have been some house.

JM: It was. As a matter of fact, Laura, I will say in all my experience in Laos I think this was the finest I saw. It was considerably better than the ambassador's residence and I think better than the prime minister's residence. I did see certainly a bigger house in Savannakhet, a city in south-central Laos which our AID regional representative was renting, which was certainly bigger, but I don't think it was nearly as nice. This house was right on the Mekong River with Thailand across the river from where we were with a balcony running the full length of the house facing the river, a very attractive and nicely inside, huge living room, a dining room, neither of which was air-conditioned, but both had overhead fans. Excuse me. There was a small air-conditioned study but I usually found that air-conditioning so cold that when I was at home I sat in the living room or out on the terrace facing the Mekong. It had three bedrooms in an area off the main part of the house. One could lock a door and Nonie and I and our two kids took those three bedrooms plus a guest house, a guest bedroom—excuse me—in another part of the house. So it was a really lovely house. We furnished it with furniture which was made by a workshop operated by the AID mission itself to make furniture for the residences of AID employees because we were not authorized to bring furniture all the way from the States.

LC: Well, that was pretty convenient that there was a workshop already turning out—

JM: Exactly. They made furniture that was very well adapted to the tropics. Both Nonie and I turned out to enjoy that house very much. We were delighted that we acceded to Bill Sullivan's original request even though I was very hesitant at first.

LC: In the end you stayed in that house throughout your tour?

JM: Yeah, throughout the whole time when we were there.

LC: It sounds very, very nice.

JM: We stayed in the house Nonie didn't like I think for about five or six weeks. Incidentally, while we were in that house we did give a dinner party or two and I'll wind up with this little anecdote. One of the dinner parties I remember very well because the principal guest was Pierre Salinger. I'm sure you've heard of Salinger.

LC: Indeed.

JM: Well, just for the record I'll say Salinger had been the chief press spokesman for President John F. Kennedy, had run for the Senate in California in 1964 and lost and was then a vice president of Continental Airlines, one of the two air outfits with which we at AID had a big air contract. I'll get into that contract later.

LC: Okay.

JM: Anyway, Salinger arrived with his new French wife shortly after we were there. Since he was a cousin of Nonie's stepfather and he knew we were there we invited him and his wife for dinner. I was quite newly arrived then and didn't really know Lao officials well at all. We tried to get a Lao minister or two at the dinner with him so as to impress him. The only one we found free on short notice was the Lao minister of communications who turned out to be one of the two Lao ministers with whom the AID mission never really worked at all during my tenure. Anyway, we had Salinger and his wife and this minister and his wife for dinner that evening. The dinner went off very well. Interestingly, two years later Salinger came back to Laos on a visit as vice president of Continental Airlines. By that time under my direction the AID mission had greatly reduced the rates that we were paying Continental. Well, first we had turned down two Continental huge planes purchased particularly for Laos, C-130s, which only two airports in Laos could accommodate. So I said after a month's trial, "Nuts to that. We're not going to use those airplanes." We also reduced the hourly rates that we were paying Continental. Two years later Salinger came, never contacted us at all because he knew that under my direction we were having this big fight with Continental.

LC: Right.

JM: So we never even saw him at all during the second one. He ignored me and I ignored him. So that was the way things turned out with this relative of Nonie's stepfather.

LC: I was just going to clarify that Nonie's stepfather was his cousin?

JM: Yes. They were cousins. I've forgotten, first or second cousins, I've forgotten which.

LC: Did he know him? Were they—?

JM: Oh, yes. Nonie's stepfather knew him quite well and knew his mother and father very well.

LC: Was he nice to Nonie when he arrived?

JM: Well, he was during that first visit.

LC: Later not so much.

JM: Well, later there was no contact whatsoever. It was an interesting footnote to history.

LC: Very much. What impression did you have of him, Joe?

JM: I think Salinger was very effective as a communicator and undoubtedly was a great press spokesman, but he also had been associated—I think the reason he became press spokesman for John Kennedy—he had been associated with [Bobby] Kennedy when [Bobby] Kennedy was investigating in the late '50s. I think it was a counsel for a Senate committee investigating corruption in the U.S. trade union movement including Jimmy Hoffa.

LC: Robert Kennedy.

JM: Yeah, Robert Kennedy.

LC: Yeah.

JM: I think that was the reason that John Kennedy later chose him because Salinger had already developed this relationship with Robert Kennedy.

LC: Okay.

JM: So there we are, Laura.

LC: Well, Joe, let's take a break there.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [32] of [57]
Date: January 10, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the tenth of January 2006. I am in Lubbock and the ambassador is in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, last time we talked about your assignment to Laos, how that came about, and your arrival there. I wonder if you would do some stage setting for us.

JM: Sure. I'd be glad to, Laura. I think you've indicated that you would like me to say something about the earlier French occupation of Laos as a colony or as I think they called it technically a protectorate. The French went into Laos originally in the latter part of the 19th century. I believe that's certainly when they went into Vietnam. I think they went into Cambodia and Laos at roughly the same time, but the French always looked on Laos as a backwater, least interesting to them of the three countries. They did relatively little in terms of development on Laos and never really considered it particularly important. For example, when we arrived in 1965 there were only twenty-one kilometers of paved road in Laos. Just to give an indication that was from Vientiane down to the crossing of the Mekong into Thailand. There were no other paved roads in Laos. As far as education was concerned the French had left very little there. There were, I don't think, even any high schools in French. If a Lao wanted to go to a high school he tended to go to a French high school in Hanoi. I know one of my best Lao friends, Ngon Sananikone, had gone to Hanoi for his high school education. Certainly there were no upper-level, university-level institutions whatsoever. The education of the French, to the extent that they did it, was in French and not in Lao, as a matter of fact. I'll just interject at this point that one of the AID projects that we undertook actually, which I inherited from my predecessor, was setting up the first high school in the history of Laos in which the instruction was in the Lao language. We used the University of Hawaii as the advisor to this establishment of this high school. Then we were gradually making progress in establishing it during my three-year period there.

I'll just interject that at the moment.

LC: That's interesting.

JM: But the French really paid relatively little attention to Laos. They didn't train any Lao administratively. Souvanna Phouma, who was the prime minister when I was in Laos, told us personally that though he had gone to university in France and had gotten a degree in engineering, when he came back to Laos under the French system he was not permitted to exercise—he was not given any opportunity to exercise his profession as an engineer whatsoever. Those jobs, to the extent that they were available, were all reserved for the French. So Laos was found as a backwater and kept as a backwater. I will say this. When we arrived in Laos I considered Laos in many ways a nation of the 12th century as I indicated during my stay there. What we in the AID mission were trying to do was to pull it up into the 19th century, not into the 20th century. Just to give an example there again on roads, we didn't attempt to pave roads either, but we did undertake a great deal of improvement of roads with laterite-type paving, not cement or macadam. Hopefully that would survive the severe rainy season there. There was not really any great French interest or support of the development of Laos during the colonial era.

LC: Well, what about—Joe, if I can just ask quickly, what did you glean in terms of leading Lao elite feelings about France? What was the view from that side?

JM: Well, let me say first. To the extent that the elite in Laos were educated they were educated in the French language and many of them spoke very good French. I found when I was there that there was only one Lao who had gone to university in the United States. He was the only Lao who really spoke English. So one in dealings with the Lao, really had to use French all the time. The educated Lao were quite literate in the French language. I don't think there was no great love for France at all that I found among the elite when I was there. I can't—some of them intermarried with the French. The Lao gentleman who owned the house in which we rented and lived during virtually all our time in Laos, as I think I indicated last time, was married to a French lady, very attractive.

He had gone to school in France also. Whether he became acquainted with her then or afterwards I'm not sure, but he married. But she was very reluctant to remain in Laos and one of the reasons I think I indicated that he built our house was to try to keep her in Laos rather than in France. She did come back during a pretty fair amount of the time that I was in Laos even though we had rented this lovely house. But subsequently after we left they were divorced and she married the Frenchman who had been the ambassador to Laos when we were there, who had a Chilean wife when we were there.

LC: Goodness.

JM: Think of all the intrigue that must have gone on.

LC: Indeed. Indeed.

JM: Anyway, certainly as far as Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister, was concerned, no love lost for France at all. With the Lao whom I was best acquainted with whom I just mentioned, Ngon Sananikone who was a member of the powerful right-wing family, though he had been educated in France he certainly had no feelings of affection for France. But I will add that because they were educated in the French language a lot of the Lao had to escape at the time of the communist takeover in 1975. Quite a number went to France simply because they were at home in the French language, including all the members of the Sananikone family who escaped from Laos. They all went to France except for this one young fellow whom I mentioned who had been educated in the States and spoke English. He did go to the United States. The others did not, but that was simply because they were comfortable in the French language. Laura, while I think of it, I'm going to mention another thing. In Laos, as in Vietnam, there were often rumors passed around that the powerful families were extremely rich and had gained a lot of their wealth through corruption. I'll refer again to the Sananikone family, which I knew so well.

LC: Yes.

JM: When they had to leave Laos when the communists took over in 1975, my friend Ngon Sananikone went to France together with, I think, all the members of his

family who had survived. We visited him—they went to France in ’75. We visited him, let’s see, in 1978. He lived in a very modest apartment in an industrial town about forty kilometers north of Paris with some of his children. Two of his sons worked in an automobile factory. There was no indication that despite the rumors that they had amassed a lot of wealth in Laos that they really had anything to speak of, that they were living more or less hand-to-mouth. They were not poor, but I would say they were living very much a lower-middle class life in France. The same thing happened with respect to the Ngo Dinh Nhus in Vietnam. I have no respect at all for Nhu and Madame Nhu, but all the rumors about the wealth they had amassed and put abroad I think turned out to be essentially false because when Diem was overthrown and Nhu was killed and Madame Nhu who happened to be abroad at the time remained in France with her children there was never any indication that she lived an ostentatiously wealthy life whatsoever on the contrary. So many of these rumors about wealth accumulated through corruption, particularly through misuse of American aid programs, a lot of that was without foundation in these countries. I just want to put that in for the historical record because there were so many rumors passed around and so many of the CIA reports that passed over my desk in both countries—they had picked up this thing from various sources and then passed it around as reports. Many of them were without any real foundation whatsoever.

LC: Let me just double-check the date that you think you visited with him in France, ’78?

JM: ’78. Yes.

LC: Okay. Well, with your permission I’ll ask you about that visit later on as I think that would be extremely interesting to hear, not only about his circumstances but also whatever you remember about your conversations with him at that point.

JM: Yes.

LC: But I take your point. I think Madame Nhu, as far as we know here at the Vietnam Archive, is still alive.

JM: As far as I know she is, too.

LC: Yes, and living between Paris and Rome, but in borrowed apartments, in apartments that are given to her for her use, but certainly not in any kind of regal style as

far as one's aware.

JM: Exactly. Though I despise her because of what she did in Vietnam, I will say this in her defense that I don't think there has ever been any indication since she was in effect exiled from Vietnam that she ever lived in any ostentatious manner indicating wealth whatsoever.

LC: Equally, she's been very reticent about public appearances.

JM: Yeah, very quiet politically for, what, more than forty years now.

LC: Yes, which is I think in itself is a very interesting development.

JM: Yes.

LC: Joe, the French imprint on Laos in other ways, in addition to the ones you've described, is this something that you can give any kind of comparative overview of? In other words, French colonial practice and how they effectively excluded elites from taking positions, like you mentioned Souvanna Phouma having no opportunity to serve as an engineer. You've lived in a number of formal French colonial possessions, including in Africa. I wonder whether this was something that you saw as a pattern or was Laos just in kind of a run-off?

JM: I think it was probably even more extreme in Laos than in Vietnam, for example. Certainly during the years 1946 to 1954, the French, partly I guess because they were obliged by political circumstances to begin to set up some kind of Vietnamese government even though they never really gave it total independence, put Vietnamese into leading positions in this government which to a degree still operated under their thumb. I think they were certainly more liberal in this respect in Vietnam than they were in Laos. I don't think they ever felt obliged in this respect to develop Laos in that manner.

LC: Yes. It's interesting because I think during that period and particularly the early part of that period, '46, '47, the emphasis for the French in terms of trying to create these stand-alone states which really wouldn't stand alone was definitely on Cambodia, what they called the Republic of Cochin China in the south and North Vietnam during that period when they were negotiating.

JM: Well, it particularly became pronounced in '49. '50 1 think was when the French set up what they called the associated states in Indochina, the three Vietnam

Cambodia, and Laos, each with at least nominally independent governments, to a degree independent, but not totally so.

LC: Right. Right. Well, Joe, if you would I think it would be extremely helpful for listeners if you could recap for us the broad goals of U.S. policy in Laos at the time you arrived and something about the background?

JM: Let me first etch in some of the background.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: There were essentially three politic military forces in Laos, the neutralists headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma who sometimes aligned with the communists and sometimes with the rightists. They oscillated depending upon events in the country. The communists, known as the Pathet Lao who were headed by Prince Souphanouvong. who was the half-brother of Souvanna Phouma. To a degree he was the nominal head. That became clear as time passed. The communists behind the scenes who were more hard line than he was actually exerted the control. One name that comes to my mind is Phoumi Vongvichit who was considered a hard-liner and who I think after the takeover in 1975 I believe emerged as a prime minister. I didn't follow it that much after '75, but I think he became a prime minister under the communists. The Pathet Lao were not a particularly effective military force themselves. They were encadred, supported often by North Vietnamese, even more than cadres by regular North Vietnamese forces in their confrontations sometimes with the neutralists and frequently with the rightists in Laos. So that in many ways the Pathet Lao were puppets of the Vietnamese communists, the North Vietnamese. Then on the right there were really two forces within the right, one headed by the Sananikone family, which I've mentioned the head of which was Phoui Sananikone who was both a prime minister and president of the National Assembly at various stages. Another group that had two prominent figures, Gen. Phoumi Nosavan who came from Savanakhet in south-central Laos—the Sananikones were strong in the Vientiane area—and the other figure allied with Gen. Phoumi Nosavan was Prince Boun Oum from farther south in Laos, who was nominally the head of his rightist group. But Phoumi Nosavan was a much more active figure in it than he was. Prince Boun Oum, like Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prince Souphanouvong, were all members of old royal families in Laos. At one time Laos had had more or less a tripartite royal structure, the

south under the control of Prince Boun Oum's family, the center Prince Souvanna Phouma's and the north by the family of the man who was king when we were there. I will mention the king as a sort of fourth figure who never played a very prominent role politically in Laos, but sometimes when crises developed could swing the situation a bit. He was not quite akin, I suppose, to the monarch in Britain. He perhaps had a bit more influence politically, but not a great deal more. I think that's not an in apt analogy to compare him to the monarchy in Britain.

LC: This is the king at Luang Prabang?

JM: Yeah. When we were there, and this had been true for quite a number of years, Laos had really two capitals. It had the royal capital in Luang Prabang where the king resided. He came occasionally to Vientiane, but very seldom. Then Vientiane, which was the administrative center for the active part of the government where the prime minister resided and all the ministers under him. So there were these two centers of political activity, but with Vientiane in many ways the more important of the two, but Luang Prabang from time to time, as I indicated, could exert some influence politically. So that was the political-military setup in Laos that had existed when we arrived for almost a decade. There had been a series of coups and counter-coups among these groups, as I've indicated, with the neutralists sometimes aligned with the communists and sometimes with the right wing. One of the more important of these coups was one in the summer of 1960 by the diminutive neutralist army captain, Kong Le, against the rightist government of the Phoumi [Sananikone] in Vientiane in which pretty soon the Russians began an airlift in which the neutralists aligned themselves with the communists. The Russians pretty soon began an airlift of supplies to this neutralist-communist alliance against the right wing. Of course, this brought the United States very much into the picture. By the time the Russians were very active in this airlift Kennedy had taken over the presidency. So that in the summer of 1961 he was faced with a real crisis in Laos as to what to do to prevent a neutralist-communist takeover with the communists in the predominant role, a takeover of Laos. He at first proposed the introduction of a substantial number of U.S. troops into Laos. As I recall, about sixteen thousand in the summer there. When he consulted the congressional leadership on this he ran into strong opposition, particularly from Sam Rayburn who was the

extremely powerful Democratic Speaker of the House and had been speaker for a long time and was one of the real power centers in Washington. Rayburn said to Kennedy, "If two or three months ago you failed to put U.S. troops into Cuba to support the Bay of Pigs invasion to overthrow Castro in Communist Cuba, I can't support you for putting American troops ten thousand miles away into Laos." So Kennedy ran into this real obstacle with respect to his Lao policy because of his timidity over the Cuban crisis in April of '61 shortly after he took over the presidency.

LC: Now, Joe, can I break in just for a moment to ask a question that I think listeners will be interested in your views on? Why in the summer of 1961 did Kennedy see Laos as such a vital area that he would be interested in placing U.S. troops there? Was that dictated solely by events in Vietnam or was there more to it?

JM: Well, because of increasing concern over Vietnam and maybe Kennedy had remembered at that stage that the last word that Eisenhower said to him when he turned over the presidency in January of '61 is, "Laos is the strategic key to Southeast Asia." In other words, what happens in Laos will determine ultimately what happens in Vietnam. As you know, I strongly feel that that is very true. That is exactly what happened. Kennedy may have remembered that and regarded Laos as extremely important for the future of South Vietnam, but also for the future of Thailand with which we were allied under the SEATO treaty. Obviously Laos would be central to Thailand's future security and turned out to be so with respect to South Vietnam because of the Ho Chi Minh Trails down through the southern Laos portion adjacent to North and South Vietnam which were used for constant infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam to support their war against the South Vietnamese and the Americans in South Vietnam. So I think Kennedy recognized at that time that Laos was extremely important to the future of our policy in Southeast Asia if we were to prevent that whole area from falling under communist control. He ran into this obstacle because he had made what I think was the wrong decision with respect to Cuba. Incidentally I'll interject, Laura, what I have probably said previously at these interviews that Kennedy's failure to support the Bay of Pigs invasion against Castro not only influenced very greatly what happened in Southeast Asia over the ensuing decade or more, but also led directly to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 with the Soviets over the introduction of Soviet atomic

missiles into Cuba. Had Kennedy been strong at the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Khrushchev would never have attempted to bring those missiles in, but because Kennedy had shown weakness there Khrushchev decided that he might be able to get away with this introduction of Soviet nuclear missiles ninety miles off the shore of the United States and brought on what I consider the greatest nuclear crisis the United States has faced in its history, which could have gone either way. If Kennedy's allegations during his presidential campaign in 1960 that Eisenhower had permitted a missile gap to develop in the favor of the Soviet Union had actually been correct, I don't think Khrushchev would have backed down when Kennedy challenged him with a quarantine against Soviet vessels approaching Cuba, a naval quarantine, in October '62. If the Soviet Union had actually possessed superiority missiles I don't believe Khrushchev would have backed down. We could have had Soviet nuclear missiles raining on the United States. I think I've said this. I remember very clearly the night Kennedy announced his quarantine policy sitting in my house in the innermost part with my family after listening to Kennedy's speech, waiting to see whether Soviet missiles would rain on Washington. They did not because the Soviets, as it turned out, the Soviets did not possess superiority so Khrushchev backed down.

LC: Joe, I remember you telling about that and it kind of, it gave me chills at the time. It kind of does now because it must have been absolutely terrifying.

JM: It was because to me that's the greatest crisis we've faced since the Civil War in the United States proper.

LC: Joe, let me ask you to—well, this is a question that surfaces from this discussion that you've just laid out. Do you think that the Soviet airlift of supplies to Kong Le was part of this pattern by Khrushchev of testing Kennedy to see how far the United States would respond or would not respond in a case where—

JM: Very definitely.

LC: Okay.

JM: Khrushchev had already marked up Kennedy's failure to support the Bay of Pigs and then this was a further testing by Khrushchev of this new, young, inexperienced president in the United States to see how far he would go, very much so. The two met at Vienna in either June or July in '61. I think Khrushchev walked all over Kennedy at

that meeting. Kennedy had not had the experience that Nixon had had in dealing with Khrushchev earlier. So Khrushchev walked all over and then proceeded shortly thereafter to encourage the East German government to erect the wall in Berlin and again Kennedy failed to react, of course, which was in Khrushchev's eyes a further sign of Kennedy weakness.

LC: So in this sort of string of tests you would put the airlift in that group?

JM: Yes. Absolutely.

LC: You mentioned that—

JM: As a matter of fact, I read somewhere just this past week, some Soviet remark that this was the biggest Soviet military operation since either World War II or—I don't think they reacted strongly to the Berlin airlift in '48 in any military sense. I think it was since World War II, which rather surprised me that the Soviets would say this.

LC: That's fascinating.

JM: This was the biggest military undertaking since then.

LC: Well, obviously this had to be staged through the People's Republic of China.

JM: Yes.

LC: Do you have any details about where that might have been staged from or the Chinese role in this? Do you have any sense of that?

JM: No, but, Laura, certainly looking back over the history of the 1960s with respect to both Laos and Vietnam, even though the split between the Soviet Union and Communist kinda—Communist China, excuse me—was becoming ever increasingly serious during that period, the Chinese always permitted the Soviets to use their territory to transport supplies to the communists, certainly in Vietnam and in this case in Laos, as well. Policies of governments cannot always be absolutely clear-cut. Your objectives may be bifurcated at times. I suppose that was true of the Communist Chinese. Though they didn't want to encourage a buildup of the Soviets they didn't want to see the communist states or areas on their southern border fall under the control of non-communists. So there was conflict of objectives. You have to play it a bit both ways. This is the kind of ambiguous policy which governments often have to pursue.

LC: And the Chinese particularly.

JM: Which the American people can find very difficult to understand, but even our government has to do it often enough.

LC: Mm-hmm. Now, turning to Speaker Rayburn and his exchange with Kennedy that you referred to and is in the literature, can you offer a view on the U.S. system which allows a locally-elected member of the House of Representatives to accumulate the degree of power where he can turn to a president and essentially threaten him in this way, threaten the president's plans for foreign policy? Sam Rayburn was extremely powerful. No question about it, but this was problematical not just for Kennedy's reading of the Soviet Union, but certainly for Sam Rayburn's reading of the Soviet Union as well. Any views on that?

JM: Well, Laura, this gets into the question of the constitutional system of the United States. What I think you're raising is a problem which we're seeing again today right now over the powers of the president versus the powers of Congress. It's certainly beginning to play out in the current Senate consideration of Alito as the nominee to the Supreme Court. This is what is involved. A president, because of our constitutional system, if he's making a major decision, certainly in the foreign policy field, needs some support from the Congress because after all the Congress controls the purse strings for the executive branch of the government. We saw that in the early 1970s when Congress increasingly cut off funds for first the U.S. forces in Southeast Asia and then increasingly for the South Vietnamese. So that Congress can in many ways ultimately control policy through its control over the purse strings. So since we do have a divided government in terms of powers between the executive and the legislative branch, leaving aside for the moment the judicial branch which is the third one, the leadership in the two branches of Congress obviously is bound to play an influential role in U.S. government policy as determined by the president. The president can't ignore it completely. He has to take into consideration the support he's going to get in Congress.

LC: Deflected as he was by Speaker Rayburn, can you just follow the story through, Joe, if you recall the president's response and what he decided to do?

JM: Yes. Sure. I'll pick it up from there.

LC: Sure.

JM: Because Kennedy's proposal to introduce U.S. forces into Southeast Asia he felt had to be abandoned because of Rayburn's opposition he then turned under Averell Harriman's influence to the idea of a new conference to determine the political future of Laos and the eventual neutralization of that country. This was a policy that was pushed very prominently on Kennedy by Harriman. Kennedy did agree to it as the alternative. A conference was called in Geneva in '61, which went on for quite a number of months, resulted in an agreement in '62, the Geneva Agreement on Laos, which said that all the foreign forces in Laos should be withdrawn, that Lao territory should not be used by any outside country to try to influence the developments in a third country, and it set up, resurrected the International Control Commission of India, Canada, and Poland to supervise the provisions of this accord. What actually happened, of course, was that the United States withdrew its military forces from Laos, but the North Vietnamese did not withdraw theirs. The Southern Laos corridor adjacent to South Vietnam was continually used, contrary to the provisions of these accords, by the North Vietnamese for infiltration of men and supplies into South Vietnam. Despite the fact that this neutralization proved in my words to be spurious, the U.S. government under Kennedy and later under Lyndon Johnson never reversed the policy about respecting these accords as far as the introduction of U.S. ground forces into Laos was concerned. We did "secretly"—and I put secretly in quotes—bomb the Ho Chi Minh trails in southern Laos, but the air power could not prevent the infiltration of men and supplies to any great extent. The U.S. CIA conducted a secret war in northeastern Laos against the North Vietnamese by the use of the Meo forces, whom I'll get to in a few minutes, and both of these were supposed to be secret programs at the insistence, I might say, of the neutralist prime minister Souvanna Phouma. He knew that the North Vietnamese were operating in Laos secretly because they never talked publicly about it.

LC: Right. About anything, right.

JM: Exactly. His insistence was that while the United States conduct counter operations against the North Vietnamese of the type that I talked about, we should never talk about them publicly. They should remain as secret as possible. Now the introduction of American ground forces could not, of course, possibly be kept secret. The United States never reversed this policy with respect to Laos. For that reason, I think,

since we never succeeded in cutting the infiltration roots we eventually lost the war in South Vietnam. Interesting, Laura, I discovered something yesterday or the day before in re-reading Roger Hilsman's *To Move a Nation* in order to refresh my memory on some of these events in Laos at the time we're discussing. Hilsman indicates that it was tacitly understood by the United States, that is by Kennedy, Harriman, and Hilsman—Hilsman was one of the chief lieutenants of Harriman in these negotiations—tacitly understood by them that what the Geneva agreements on Laos really meant was that the North Vietnamese would not attempt to penetrate the Mekong Valley which remained under the control of the non-communist forces in Laos provided that the mountainous area of Laos, both northern Laos and southern Laos adjacent to South Vietnam and North Vietnam would be left under the control of the communists. I had forgotten this. I don't think I've ever really forgotten that this was even tacitly understood by the Democratic administration. If that is true, I think that renders them even more criminally liable for the loss of the war in Vietnam than I had thought. I thought it was just a mistake in policy which should have been reversed, but they really understood it tacitly according to Hilsman from the outset. I think that is absolutely unforgivable in a political sense for the future of what occurred in Vietnam. I had not remembered that it was tacitly decided. I don't know whether you had remembered that or not.

LC: Not at all. No. No, I didn't remember that at all.

JM: That came out very much in Hilsman.

LC: That's extraordinary.

JM: Hilsman was a principal lieutenant of Harriman and Harriman was the principal advisor to Kennedy on Lao policy.

LC: Hilsman's background, as well I think, adds to the indictment that you're laying out, Joe, because of his experience in Burma during World War II.

JM: Exactly, which he would constantly use against McNamara in trying to determine how the United States should proceed in a military sense.

LC: Right. Well, I can imagine that he did use that and every other card he could come up with.

JM: Which eventually led to his downfall in the U.S. government, as I think

we've covered earlier.

LC: Right. Right. You have mentioned that. Extraordinary. In fact, I'm sorry, I wasn't aware that he played that large a role in the negotiations over Laos at Geneva.

JM: Because he succeeded. I think he was Harriman's choice to succeed him as assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs when Harriman moved up to the number three position in the State Department. Harriman at that time was the chief negotiator for the U.S. in the Geneva conference on Laos. The two of them, Harriman and Hilsman, constantly agreed on policy with respect to Southeast Asia in the meetings that Kennedy called in the White House. That's clear from the record.

LC: That's extremely interesting. Well, it doesn't improve the view from this vantage point.

JM: Exactly. I was amazed to find this a day or two ago. I never realized it before. It had not—the significance of it certainly had not sunk into me sufficiently at any rate.

LC: Very interesting. Well, Joe, when you came to Vientiane in 1965 can you lay out the government structure at that time?

JM: Well, Laura, by the time I arrived in '65 we still had these three principal political forces, the communists, the neutralists, and the rightists. Phoumi Nosavan had been eliminated by the time I arrived in Vientiane in September of '65. He attempted to mount a coup in February of '65, I think it was, against the Souvanna Phouma government, failed, and was ousted from Laos and went into exile in Thailand. In the future didn't play any political role in Laos to any degree whatsoever. So he was eliminated as a factor. So when I arrived these three principal political-military forces were in Laos. By that time the neutralists were working with the rightists. The communists had—Souvanna Phouma in '62 as part of the Geneva settlement had set up a tripartite government, communist, neutralist, and rightist, but the communists withdrew from that government and went off into northeastern Laos in 1963. They said they felt threatened by the rightists and withdrew. So by the time I got there it was a government of the neutralists and the rightists, with Souvanna Phouma still holding open the possibility that the communists would return to the government, which of course they didn't do until they were able to takeover effective control in the mid-1970s.

LC: Joe, can you—

JM: That was essentially the political-military situation and it really continued essentially along those lines during the three years I was on Laos. There was one episode in 1966 within the rightist part of the government when General Ma, who was the effective—he was a very small man—effective small head of the Air Force, a very brave little fellow who would go out in his little fabric-covered T-28 with his younger pilots and bomb the communists. A man who was active and energetic in contrast to so many of the Lao military on the conservative side. He felt that he was being pushed out by the Sananikones. One of the military leaders, Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, had married into the Sananikone family. General Ma felt that General Kouprasith was trying to oust him from his position as head of the Air Force and he tried to, I guess, mount a coup. What he did, he began to bomb the general staff headquarters in Vientiane and General Kouprasith's headquarters at a military base a few kilometers outside Vientiane. Laura, while we're on this I'll raise some interesting aspects of this. When this took place Nonie and I were in southern Laos with Ngon Sananikone and his wife. We were on an inspection trip. When we got the word that General Ma was mounting this attempt we were all having lunch in the Bolovens Plateau in a French restaurant. Ngon Sananikone and his wife were immediately worried about their own family because they thought that General Ma might even bomb their house. So we got into our vehicles and drove down from the Bolovens Plateau to Pakse. I don't know the distance, maybe thirty kilometers. I found when I got to Pakse that there was one of my rice drop airplanes there. I commandeered it so that we could get back to Vientiane, but before we left I got a radio message from Bill Sullivan, the ambassador in Vientiane, saying that General Ouane Rattikone, who was the head of the Lao armed forces, was in a jeep on the road heading toward Pakse, still quite a distance out, but being strafed by General Ma's airplanes and would I wait until General Ouane arrived there and bring him back to Vientiane in the airplane. So we waited for him. When he arrived, we got on board. These rice drop airplanes were not fitted for passengers. There were four seats in this airplane. We were about thirty people. We even had the widow of an ex-prime minister of Laos among the group wanting to get to Vientiane. General Ouane, who immediately commandeered one of the four seats on the airplane and fell asleep, and the rest of us got

in there. Nonie and I, I think, sat on the floor on the way back to Vientiane. We got over the airport of Vientiane. We were told that it would be safer if we landed over in Thailand at Udorn. Nonie said, "No. My children are here. I don't know what's happening to them. We're going to land here." We were told that [it was not known] who was in control of the airfield and we might be shot down as we tried to land. Well, because of Nonie's insistence we did proceed to land. I must say by that time General Ouane was awake. He got up and stood in the open doorway of the airplane as we were landing, rolling down the runway. We could see soldiers on the runway, armed soldiers. We weren't sure if they were friendly or not. Ouane did have the courage to stand in this open doorway and thank God it turned out they were friendly. Well, we got to our house from there and talked to our two children who were in the American school, which was then I think about a kilometer or half-a-kilometer from the general staff headquarters, which had been subject to bombing. Priscilla, our middle daughter, then about fourteen, said, "When the bombing started we were told by our teachers to get under our desk." She said, "It was rather scary, Daddy." As you can imagine. We breathed a sigh of relief because the kids were home and safe, but that's a bit of a personal aspect of—General Ma's coup did fail. He fled into Thailand and was no longer a factor afterwards, but it was regrettable that this had to occur because he had been an effective head of the Air Force in Laos. I'll add one more little footnote about—

LC: Sure.

JM: About General Ma just of human interest. I think I had been in Laos just a few months when I invited General Ma among others for dinner at our house. I noticed one thing, which I guess I had heard about. General Ma never wore socks with his shoes. Here he was at our dinner party without any socks in his shoes, which was incidentally interesting, but as we sat down he turned to me and he said, "Mr. Mendenhall, would you drill us a well at Seno Air Force Base near Savannakhet in south-central Laos?" I said, "General Ma, the French have been using that base for decades. So there must be plenty of water there." He said, "Oh, no." He said, "The French didn't have a well and they don't have an adequate supply of water." He said, "The French never take a bath, but the Lao have to have a bath every day so we need a well." I said,

"Okay, General Ma. You'll get it with that approach to me." So we dug a well for him at Seno Air Force Base and I thought that was a wonderful remark by a Lao about the French.

LC: Very revealing.

JM: With that part we can wind up for today, Laura.

LC: Okay, fine.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [33] of [57]
Date: February 10, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the tenth of February 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is as usual at his home in Nevada. Joe, if you would, I would be very happy to have your thoughts about the military side of things in Laos as you arrived there.

Joseph Mendenhall: Right. Well, as I indicated on the political side there was no substantial change in the political situation in Laos during the three years I was there, from 1965 to 1968. The political setup remained essentially as it had emerged in, oh, '63, '64, and early '65 before I got there.

LC: Yes.

JM: On the military front, likewise, there was no substantial change during the three years I was actually in-country, but a year before I got there, there had been a very, very significant development, which you and I have referred to from time to time in these interviews. That is the fact that the North Vietnamese communist infiltration of armed men, of soldiers into South Vietnam changed very, very significantly in nature starting in the summer of '64. I think I have referred to the fact that the first intelligence I ever saw on that was in July of '64, a report that I think this was just a single North Vietnamese soldier, but a regular from the North Vietnamese Army had been captured who had been infiltrated from North Vietnam via southern Laos into South Vietnam. Prior to that time all of the infiltration from North Vietnam into South Vietnam had consisted of South Vietnamese communists who had been regrouped or taken to North Vietnam in 1954 at the time of the conclusion of the Geneva Accords on Vietnam. Ninety thousand communists were taken to North Vietnam, quite legally under the accords. A million northerners left to go south.

LC: Yes.

JM: These ninety thousand that opted to go to North Vietnam from South Vietnam and from the beginning of the infiltration by the North Vietnamese communists—or actually I'll call it the re-infiltration of these people—in the latter years

of the ’50s up to the summer of ’64 all of the infiltration had consisted of men taken from this group. The fact that the intelligence which I picked up in the summer of ’64 indicated that a North Vietnamese regular had been infiltrated signified that North Vietnam had exhausted the supply of these regrouped southerners to infiltrate into South Vietnam. Hanoi’s original plan was to portray to the world that this was a civil war within South Vietnam and that these were South Vietnamese fighting each other. So consistent with that plan, North Vietnam had been re-infiltrating up to the summer of ’64 only these regrouped southerners, but with the supply obviously exhausted they began first re-infiltrating single people as fillers for their forces in South Vietnam. As was clearly indicated pretty soon they would begin infiltrating North Vietnamese regular army units into South Vietnam. I think you indicated, Laura, that you’d seen some intelligence that regular North Vietnamese units were already being infiltrated via southern Laos into South Vietnam by July of ’64. I hadn’t personally seen anything that early, but I think you indicated some time ago that you had seen something to that effect.

LC: In fact, I thought somewhat the opposite, that in fact your sighting of this document was earlier than anything I had seen in the secondary literature about the timing of the arrival of the first NVA (North Vietnamese Army).

JM: As far as what I had seen that was true.

LC: Yes.

JM: This infiltration of a filler was the first thing I saw, but pretty soon the North Vietnamese regular army units began being infiltrated via southern Laos into South Vietnam as well.

LC: Right. I think that—

JM: That to me was a major sea change in the military situation as far as both Laos and South Vietnam were concerned.

LC: Yes. Yes, I agree. I think it’s absolutely a turning point.

JM: From then on nothing that significant in the military situation changed during my three years in Laos other than the fact that more and more armed units from the regular forces of North Vietnam were sent down over the so-called Ho Chi Minh trails into South Vietnam. Now I think I had indicated earlier when I saw this intelligence report, the first one I had seen of the infiltration of a northerner into South Vietnam, I sent a

memorandum to Bill Bundy who was the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs, calling his attention to the significance of this and recommending that the U.S.—and I pulled these figures out of the air since I'm not a military expert—put three divisions of U.S. troops along the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam and on across on the line through southern Laos to Savannakhet on the Mekong River to halt this infiltration or cut it back so there wouldn't represent any significant development. All I got back from Bundy was noted on my memorandum a perfunctory response to what I had suggested. As my knowledge through subsequent developments has expanded on this, I think I understand why Bundy did that. He was taken, as so many at the top of both the Kennedy and Johnson administration were taken by the neutralization of Laos by the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos that they could not look beyond that to any significant development which might argue for a change in that policy. I re-read recently, Laura, a book which you may be acquainted with by Norman Hannah, published in I think 1987 called *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War*.

LC: In fact, I was just looking at it this morning. Yes, sir.

JM: You were?

LC: Yes.

JM: Okay. Well, I re-read that book and it's raised quite a number of very interesting things. One is that Hannah had developed the same analysis that I had of the significance of southern Laos, the infiltration through southern Laos, to the war in South Vietnam as I had. Interestingly, even though he and I were both deputy directors in the office of Southeast Asian Affairs for several months together in late '63 and very early '64, I was responsible for Vietnam as the deputy director. He was responsible for the other Southeast Asian countries. Even though we in a sense worked side by side neither was aware of the views of the other on this significant point. I think I understand why. Hannah's book points out that when he originally developed this idea, he put it into a memorandum, but he sent it only to the director of the office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Barney Koren. I think Hannah was already aware that anybody in the official departments who was coming up with this new idea that southern Laos was so significant to the war in South Vietnam would be going counter to the prevailing view and attitude held by the top level and particularly by Governor Harriman who had in a sense foisted

this on to President Kennedy. Then President Johnson picked it up when he took over from Kennedy that if one went contrary to Harriman's position one risked the continuation of his career. Hannah, I think, indicates in his book that at one time he was chewed out by Harriman saying, "What are you doing trying to change my policy?" I suppose this also helped to account for Bundy's perfunctory noted on my memorandum. Further on Bundy, Bundy reviewed the Hannah book in the late 1980s for the *Washington Post* and made what I thought was the most fatuous comment, a very revealing statement that this idea of putting U.S. troops into southern Laos to cut off the infiltration route was an idea that had never occurred to him. Here was the man that was assistant secretary of East Asian Affairs for five years from '64 to '69 and responsible for the development of many of the policy proposals in the administration who in his own words had never even thought of this idea. To me that was a stunning revelation.

LC: Well, not only that but it also belies his having the comment that he made on your memorandum. It may not have occurred to him *sui generis*.

JM: He obviously hadn't remembered.

LC: Right. Clearly.

JM: Incidentally another thing he hadn't remembered, if indeed he ever saw it, Hannah sent his first memorandum, as I said, simply to his own office director, Barney Koren.

LC: Yes.

JM: Hannah shortly thereafter was shifted in positions to that of the political advisor to the U.S. commander-in-chief in the Pacific in Honolulu. Hannah further developed these ideas of his while he was there and prepared a multi-page document outlining in detail his views on this for the commander-in-chief of the Pacific and also sent a copy to Bill Bundy. This was in early '65. According to Hannah's book, he got a reply back not from Bundy, who I take it probably didn't even look at it, but from Marshall Green who was Bundy's deputy, sort of giving him the brush-off essentially, "Since we're still studying various ideas here in Washington, if you have any new ones please bring them to our attention," which I considered sort of the bureaucratic brush-off when one has gotten perhaps the instruction, "Don't get into the substance of what this guy has recommended."

LC: What was your own impression of Norman Hannah?

JM: I'd known Hannah not well, but slightly since 1955 when he was the Iranian desk officer and I was for thirty days on temporary duty in the Office of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Affairs. I got to know him much better, of course, in the Far Eastern Bureau. My view of Hannah was always very favorable. I thought he was a very intelligent individual. I did not know that he went into so many of these problems in the depths which his book reveals. I think that speaks even better for him. But looking at this from a career bureaucratic standpoint, Laura—

LC: Yes.

JM: It's interesting to me that Hannah, who kept pursuing this idea, never dropped it. I didn't pursue it after I got this noted by Bundy on my memorandum. I didn't pursue it during the remaining year I was in Washington other than in a rather peripheral sense. I was invited to Portland, Oregon, to give a talk on Vietnam. That evening at dinner I was seated right beside General Johnson who was the Army chief of staff, who I think had participated in the same public meeting that I had in Portland. I raised this idea with him there because I thought at dinner here was a chance to test this idea on a very high military officer. He seemed quite interested and generally responsive, but I think I now know from reading Hannah's book and much other literature that even Johnson knew that this idea would not meet with favor in top circles in Washington at the White House and at the Pentagon and at the State Department. So he didn't totally commit himself. I also know from Hannah's book that evidently Ellsworth Bunker, when he was first named ambassador to South Vietnam in 1967, also put forth this idea and found that the higher ups were not receptive and felt obliged to drop it. Now here is a man independently wealthy who could pursue his ideas even into the public domain had he chose. Hannah and I were in a different position. Since we were career officers with families to support we worked under limitations. I didn't pursue my idea further in Washington because I knew that my stock and credibility had suffered after I had been so identified with the change of the Diem regime which was succeeded by a couple of years of political chaos in South Vietnam, which certainly didn't help my reputation in any upper circles in Washington. So I felt that I wasn't really in a position to push this idea farther at the time.

LC: Joe, as you note, Norman Hannah says that he did continue to sort of lobby for this while he was in Hawaii.

JM: Not only in Hawaii, but even after he became the deputy chief of mission in Bangkok, which was his next assignment. He even had a chance to—well, he talked with Richard Nixon, I think he said in 1967 when Nixon was on a trip to Vietnam, I guess probably an around the world trip. He was in Bangkok at that time. He talked to Hannah extensively about this idea. Then after Nixon became president and made a visit to Bangkok, he recognized Hannah and asked him to send him more information on this idea which he had remembered from before. So Hannah certainly pushed his idea, which never really got anywhere as we know. Hannah unfortunately wound up as consul general in Sydney. That's where his career wound up. I think Hannah should have been an ambassador whether this—I suspect this worked against him, the fact that he pushed these ideas so vigorously, which was not welcome at the top. It's an interesting comment on the bureaucratic system, isn't it, Laura?

LC: Well, it's very interesting and it also sort of compels me to ask the, I think, fairly obvious question. What within the bureaucratic system at the very highest levels in Washington would explain this amazing commitment to retain the obviously failed agreements reached at Geneva over Laos? In other words, why was there such reluctance to change course with regard to the neutralization of Laos?

JM: Well, Laura, the only explanation I can give—your question really gets down to why didn't President Johnson, who as president was responsible for the highest level political military strategy with respect to the Vietnam War—that's not a function of the military in the Pentagon. That's a function of the top-level elected official in the United States. Why didn't he change that policy, which had been initiated by Kennedy at Harriman's urging? Laura, I think I would put it first that I don't believe that Johnson was really a knowledgeable strategist in the military field. He was a master tactician in the political field in Washington in getting legislation through the Congress. As he showed he got legislation through shortly after he became president which Kennedy had found

impossible to get through because he was such a master tactician with respect to the Congress. I don't think Johnson's mind operated that way. I don't think he had the capability of strategizing the way Eisenhower did, for example. I think that's one explanation. I think perhaps the second explanation is that Johnson was always careful to try not to antagonize the Kennedy wing of the Democratic Party and that changing the Kennedy decision with respect to this spurious neutralization of Laos would have meant a major fight between him and that wing of the Democrats. I think those are, to me, the two explanations as to why the policy didn't get changed when it should have been changed with respect to our military actions regarding Laos.

LC: So the long shadow of Averell Harriman?

JM: Exactly. Now that's interesting, too, Laura, because reading through a book published on Johnson's tapes—I've forgotten what it's called now. I read that a year or so ago.

LC: Yes, when they came out, yes.

JM: Well, they did come out earlier, but I finally got around to reading it. In a conversation between Johnson and Fulbright, a senator from Arkansas and the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, very revealing I thought, they were both making fun of Harriman in this telephone conversation as being sort of over-the-hill and so old and past his better years of activity and judgment. Yet when Johnson opted for negotiation in 1968 with respect to Vietnam whom did he place in charge of the negotiations? Harriman, who had negotiated this spurious Lao neutralization in the early '60s. He turned to Harriman to do it.

LC: That certainly supports—

JM: It's almost inexplicable, too, in view of this conversation between him and Fulbright a couple years earlier.

LC: Well, of course, politicians can certainly be duplicitous. We both know that.

JM: That's right.

LC: But that is, I think, important evidence to support your argument that the Kennedy wing, if you want, of the Democratic Party still needed to be paid obeisance by—

JM: I think so, too, Laura.

LC: The other wild card that I might throw, Joe, and just see what reaction you have and again, talking about the issue of why Johnson in ’64, ’65 and on and on did not decide to move a blocking force into southern Laos and thereby certainly flush the Geneva agreements. The other, I think, card that we might discuss is the potential response of the People’s Republic of China. Do you think that played much of a role in Johnson’s calculus and again recognizing that he probably wasn’t always thinking on these planes?

JM: Laura, I don’t see how that would have played much of a factor with respect to our intervening in southern Laos. In northern Laos adjacent to China or in North Vietnam my reaction would be different, but I don’t think extending a blocking line across southern Laos from the demilitarized zone line in Vietnam on over to the Mekong, I don’t think that would have been regarded as so threatening by China as to warrant its intervention as moving all the way up to the Yalu in Korea had done, what, oh, almost twenty years earlier. Fifteen years earlier, excuse me.

LC: Joe, your suggestion in the memo that you penned was to essentially move troops, United States forces, from the demilitarized zone to Savannakhet?

JM: That’s right. Exactly, and establish a line more or less similar to the line that had been established in Korea in 1953 which still exists today and has kept the situation in Korea from boiling over again. I think we would have had to fight from time to time against the North Vietnamese there, but there were quite a few generals, I subsequently learned, who have agreed with this thesis. One Hannah points out in his book was the commander of the U.S. ground forces in the Pacific who was on the staff of the commander-in-chief of the Pacific in Honolulu. I also know from a book, I think it’s called *The Twenty Five Years’ War* by General Bruce Palmer who was the number two to General Abrams in Vietnam for quite a number of years from ’68 or ’69 on—’68 on I guess it was.

LC: Yes.

JM: That Palmer also agreed with this idea and he was the one who has said in his book that he believes that sending U.S. forces into southern Laos to establish this blocking line would have required fewer U.S. forces than we eventually put into Vietnam and would have resulted in fewer casualties, which was the factor that I think eventually helped to turn U.S. public opinion against the war in Vietnam. These were both four-star generals, top-ranking generals who also believed in this thesis with Hannah and I defended.

LC: Would Johnson have made a stronger presentation of American willingness to deploy overseas had he taken this kind of blocking decision in say, late ’64 rather than sending in dribs and drabs of Marines to guard certain installations in early ’65?

JM: Yeah. Certainly Johnson didn’t want to, for political reasons, didn’t want to take any such decision or action prior to the election in ’64 because that was his top priority at that time.

LC: Right.

JM: It would have been better in the summer of ’64 to have done this from the standpoint of the fact that the North Vietnamese were beginning to infiltrate North Vietnamese by this route. There would have been that justification for our doing it. But certainly when he started putting U.S. troops into South Vietnam in early ’65 I think it would have been wiser to have proceeded to have put them along the demilitarized zone and on across Laos to Savannakhet on the Mekong at that stage.

LC: Indeed, before the ’64 election he had, did he not, the blank check in his hand essentially, the—

JM: Right, which is what he—

LC: The Tonkin Gulf—

JM: Used to justify putting U.S. troops into South Vietnam and starting in ’65, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

LC: Might he have been better advised by the Joint Chiefs of Staff at this point, do you think?

JM: I think there is some indication that the Joint Chiefs of Staff tried this and didn’t get anywhere, Laura.

LC: Because of the—

JM: This to me was a political decision which was imposed upon the military as well as the Foreign Service.

LC: Do you have any sense, Joe, just speaking about President Johnson for a moment, that as time wore on and as the war continued and he continued to send more troops that he recognized on some level that he was out of his depth?

JM: I think so, Laura, because there are so many public indications that when certain people were called into this office Johnson sounded as though he was flailing around for what to do, always asking for advice.

LC: "What do you think? What do you think?"

JM: Yes. Exactly. I think your point's well taken there, very well. Again, I agree with you. I think this indicates he was out of his depth on this kind of problem. He had remarkable ability in certain fields and I think almost total inability in terms of political-military strategy.

LC: Well, as a historian I'm very anxious for Robert Caro, who is doing this enormous life study of LBJ to release his forthcoming volume, which will be about the presidency. I don't know whether you've had a look at the volume *Master of the Senate,* which—

JM: I didn't read that one, Laura, because I thought I knew that one pretty—

LC: You've got that idea, right. Yes, but it certainly puts all the players on the ground in terms of the domestic political side in the elected offices and the people who then, of course, come to praise LBJ's management of the war and I think, of course, are hoping to be rewarded for doing so as most senators, I guess, do. But it's an interesting historical problem as to when he might have taken the bolder step that several people were—it was clearly on the wind. I mean, the fact that you discussed it and that Norman Hannah discussed it and General Palmer and others who have come forward and said this was an idea that was rejected.

JM: Interesting that Hannah's book indicates in a conversation or exchange of letters, I've forgotten which, with Ambassador Bunker, I think in 1983, Bunker indicated that Westmoreland was in favor of this idea as well. I don't think I'd ever picked that up elsewhere.

LC: I think there's also in that book some mention of Hannah's having

presented this idea to Bill Sullivan.

JM: Oh, yeah. There was on that. This is the reason I didn't push it while I was in Laos. This was the first time I ever raised this question during the three years I was in Laos where I immersed myself in the job to which I was assigned. The only time I ever raised it was with the defense attaché, Clark Baldwin, who had been a National War College classmate of mine. I knew Clark quite well. He was then a colonel. He eventually became a major general. I remember at some point in '67 he was saying he was very optimistic about the situation in South Vietnam and that we would be able to win it following the attrition strategy that we were. I disagreed with him strongly, making the arguments which you and I have been discussing now. That was the only time. I never raised it with Bill Sullivan because I knew that Bill, in a sense as an acolyte of Harriman's, was thoroughly sold on the Harriman position. There was no point from either a personal standpoint or a professional standpoint in trying to push the idea with Bill. I know Hannah's exchange with him, I think, verifies that conclusion of mine.

LC: Yes. I think it backs up that your choice was a wise one.

JM: Right. I would have gotten nowhere. If I had pushed it, I think it would have hurt my relations with Bill. There were other things in which I disagreed with Bill professionally and even took one difference to Washington. Bill never held that against me at all, but I think in this one he probably would have. Even later in retirement I remember later at one point Bill and I were engaging in a brief discussion with this and he came down very hard on me even in retirement.

LC: Well, these things ran very deep as our discussion, I think, has illustrated.

JM: Laura, I know from other experiences that personal and professional friendships can definitely come to an end over policy differences. I lost some very close friends over policy on Vietnam. I may be in a position now in losing some over policy on Iraq.

LC: Well, I shall not be among the casualties.

JM: Right. Well, that I understand. Feelings can run extremely deeply as you know.

LC: Yes. It's very, very true.

JM: On political and policy issues.

LC: I thought it interesting that Hannah's discussions with Sullivan were more extensive in terms of Sullivan's suggestion that possibly the United States might have made some incursion at Vinh.

JM: Bill has discussed that idea with me. I personally think that it would have been a disastrous idea myself.

LC: Why do you say that, Joe?

JM: Well, partly because moving troops into North Vietnam might well have encouraged a Chinese intervention. You and I now know the Chinese claim they had three hundred troops in North Vietnam by what, 1968 I think, in order to release North Vietnamese troops for fighting in the South.

LC: Yes.

JM: So they certainly had the troops on the ground whom they could have called into action. We now know that. Plus the fact that Bill's idea was to seize an enclave in the southern part of North Vietnam and hold onto that as a negotiating ploy with Hanoi. I think it is very clear that Hanoi would never have agreed in negotiations to any solution contrary to its ultimate aim. I think that's very clear.

LC: As you point out, that goes back in communist's public statements.

JM: To 1958 to General Giap's book.

LC: I think even before that. Perhaps this is something you and I can discuss later but I think that those sentiments were on the table easily during the French period as well.

JM: Oh, I would imagine they were, Laura.

LC: Yes. Yeah. Do you have additional observations about the rate of infiltration and how that changed between '65 and '68?

JM: Well, it obviously increased substantially over the years and the nature of the Ho Chi Minh Trail also changed because it was constantly improved. By the time that Saigon fell in 1975 the Ho Chi Minh Trail had paved roads and a pipeline running from North Vietnam to South Vietnam via southern Laos.

LC: Yes. Joe, let me ask about the period that you were there. Hopefully we'll discuss this in more detail later, but between 1965 and 1968 did the area within Laos to

which you had personal access shrink?

JM: Well, Laura, it oscillated. Sometimes it shrank and sometimes it expanded a bit, but never really significantly in either direction. That raises another observation or two I might make about the military situation.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: The chief military activity in which the U.S. was involved aside from bombing southern Laos, the infiltration trails, which did not achieve the results desired obviously. The principal other military activity in which we were engaged was the war in northeastern Laos fought by a tribal group which we always called the Meo there. They're now called the Hmong here in the States, H-M-O-N-G, but we always called them Meo, M-E-O, even though I believe if you go back far enough it means slave. The Meo never seemed to resent it when we were there. That's the word always used during the three years I was there. I don't think anybody ever used Hmong, the Meo or anybody else.

LC: I didn't realize that, Joe. That's very interesting terminology being what it was and how it evolved.

JM: I might just say a word about the Meo. They had originally come from southern China into Laos.

LC: Yes.

JM: They were, I think, the largest minority group in Laos and probably—well, I hesitate to say more advanced, but I think they were a bit more advanced than most of the tribal groups. There were a lot of tribal groups in Laos, both adjacent to Vietnam and in northwestern Laos, but the Meo were the biggest. They tended to live on tops of mountains, interestingly enough, which most tribal groups lived a bit farther down, but the Meo lived on top and cultivated the sides of the mountains from the top. They engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture. They would move every few years as the fertility of the soil was exhausted where they were growing their hill rice, which is very different from lowland rice in the method of cultivation. It resists dry weather much better than the lowland rice, which is planted during the wet season. It grows during the wet season or under irrigation during the dry season. But the Meo used dry rice methods of cultivation. When their areas of cultivation where the soil was exhausted they would

move on, slash and burn the forest and use that area for a few years and move on then. That was their basic method of survival. The other product, which they raised aside from their rice to sustain themselves, were opium poppies. I'll make a comment on that, Laura, while we're here.

LC: Sure.

JM: Interestingly, opium was not outlawed in Laos during the years we were there. You could go into the market and see huge cakes of dripping opium with a knife next to them where if you wanted to buy some the seller would simply cut off a piece of opium and wrap it up and give it to you. I've seen the dripping opium myself in the markets, as I say, not outlawed in Laos. The Meo, as they had traditionally along with some others in Laos, raised it and sold it.

LC: Now, when you say dripping what do you mean?

JM: Well, it was a solid, but there was liquid dripping out of it.

LC: Okay, so just kind of oozing.

JM: I'd never seen opium before. That was an interesting fact to me.

LC: Fascinating. Yes.

JM: There was another observation I was going to make. Oh, the other interesting thing was that despite the fact that opium was freely available on the market in Laos, drug taking was certainly not an issue when we were there. Two of our three girls who were in Laos during much of the time we were there in school became acquainted and ran around with a lot of young Lao boys. We never were aware of any instance of drugs among these boys at all. These were the children of, what shall I say, the upper-middle classes to the extent one can speak of that in Laos. The differences between the upper and lower classes, though great, were not the kind that you see in the States because even the upper classes didn't have a great deal of money in Laos. But there was never any indication of drug taking. It was only when our kids got back to the States that we had to start worrying about American schools, not about association with Lao boys in Laos. So that was also another interesting thing. I think later drug taking did begin to develop in Laos as well, but certainly not while we were there in any way that we ever noticed. The only person that I ever saw who I thought was probably under the influence of drugs one night was the son of Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister.

(Laughs)

LC: Can you tell me about that evening?

JM: Well, Laura, I don't think I better get this into the public record.

LC: Understood. Absolutely understood. Now, Joe, you said the markets were certainly open to the sale of opium and you could cut it by the slab and have whatever you wanted. What were the uses of it? Medicinally and so on?

JM: I don't know what the Lao used it for. I think this was for sale by dealers who had come to buy it and take it abroad, I think, probably. One of the people who was accused very much of opium running was General Ouane Rattikone, the chief of the Lao armed forces. He got his opium primarily from the Golden Triangle where Burma, Laos and Thailand meet. I'll mention a little story there, Laura. I'll mention a couple of stories with respect to General Ouane.

LC: Okay. At your discretion, of course.

JM: Our kids got to know General Ouane's daughters and they used to visit back and forth and stay overnight. One day at lunch I said something to Priscilla, our middle, the daughter, the older of the two, about General Ouane and his opium running activities and that he was such a crook. She turned to me and said, "But Daddy, he's such a nice crook." I've always remembered that. (Laughs)

LC: She's a cutie.

JM: She was about thirteen or fourteen when she made that remark. She'd always had a very nice time at his house and he'd always treated her very well when she was there. The other little incident I would like to recount to you, and this I think was in early 1968. Leuam Insisenmay, who was the deputy prime minister, turned to me one day when I saw him and was with him and said, "I've never been in the northwestern most province of Laos." I think it's called among Hua Khong. Ban Houei Sai was the capital. He said, "The next time you go up there in your airplane may I go along?" I said, "Certainly, absolutely. I'd be delighted to have you with me up there." So I took him and also in the same trip Keo Vipakhone, who was a minister in the government, was along. Keo often traveled with me on these trips into the countryside. Incidentally, Keo was I think the only prominent Lao whom I knew during my years in Laos who

remained as an official after the communists took over in 1972.

LC: Is he K-A-Y-O?

JM: No. K-E-O.

LC: K-E-O. Okay

JM: Keo's wife's brother, I think, was one of the heads of the communists. His name was—what was his name? I can't remember his name now exactly, but he was one of the heads, which may explain why Keo remained on.

LC: He often traveled with you.

JM: We knew about this, but I never suspected Keo of any pro-communist activities and I knew him quite well. Keo and I often enough got involved in little altercations of our own on this trip. It never affected our personal relations, but we would have our professional differences. Because we became so well acquainted we could discuss almost anything professionally or personally.

LC: Sure. Sure.

JM: Anyway, on this trip up into the Golden Triangle we were having lunch. We had brought our lunch with us, a packed lunch on the grounds of a school which the USAID had built in that area. We were right on the Mekong and I think we could look across I think into Burma. I've forgotten whether it was Burma or Thailand. We were sitting there having lunch and we noticed that the windows, a lot of the windows, had been broken in this school building. Keo turned to me and said, "Why don't you fix those windows?" I said, "Look, Keo, I know that those windows were destroyed in one of the opium wars between General Ouane and I think the Kuomintang in Burma. So if you want those windows fixed you turn to General Ouane and get him to do it." (Laughs)

LC: What did he do? What was his reaction?

JM: He didn't react badly. I think he was probably fine because he didn't react. Because I said, Keo and I—I remember one time another Lao minister who was on the trip, he and Keo, with me in southern Laos. Keo and I got involved in such a hot and heavy argument this other minister mediated between us. (Laughs)

LC: Well, this is diplomacy Mendenhall style.

JM: Just to show you that it never affected my personal relations, when in 1972 I

was named ambassador to Madagascar.

LC: Yes.

JM: I stopped in Paris en route to Madagascar to take up my post for two or three days. Keo was then the ambassador of Laos to France. The communists had not taken over the ambassador to France. Keo and his wife invited my wife and me for lunch while we were in Paris.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Obviously it had not affected our personal relations at all.

LC: That's incredible. That's really very, very interesting. Joe, can I just ask again, where was the school located? I'm now—

JM: It was up in the Golden Triangle. I remember we could see—the school was right on the Mekong. I think we were facing Burma or the very northern tip of Thailand. I can't remember which now.

LC: Where might you have flown into?

JM: Actually that day, Laura, that was one of the most—I made many trips into the boondocks, if I can put it that way, of the provinces in Laos.

LC: Sure.

JM: This was one of the most interesting of all because we saw the greatest diversity of tribal groups I have ever seen in my life.

LC: On that day?

JM: Both in looks and in the way they dressed and the way they acted on this one-day trip up there. It was absolutely fascinating. I'll tell you another thing about this trip. I guess we landed on a lot of small airstrips. On one, the pilot took off and then turned back and buzzed the little airstrip two or three times. I could see that the deputy prime minister, Leuam Insisenmay, was very upset over this. So since these pilots were part of a contract which we were financing, I went up and chewed out the pilot and said, "Never do that again. I've got the deputy prime minister on board."

LC: How did that go down?

JM: Well, the pilot knew who I was so he took it all right.

LC: Very good. Yes, you were paying the bills.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Well, let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [34] of [57]
Date: February 17, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the seventeenth of February 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking from Nevada as he usually does. Joe, you wanted to make an additional note about Norman Hannah, I think.

Joseph Mendenhall: Yes, about Norman Hannah's book, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War*, which we discussed substantially the last time. There's one point that I would—I agree with almost everything Hannah has said in his book and certainly with his central thesis, which is reflected in his title, Laos, the key to the Vietnam War, in effect. The one point with which I disagree is Norm's indication that he felt that the new Nixon administration elected in 1968 could in its first year, 1969, have revised the U.S. strategy to adopt the one that Norm was pushing and which I have indicated that certainly represents my view as well. That is to really focus on cutting the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos into South Vietnam. My own view is that after the reaction in the United States by the press and subsequently by the electorate and by the Congress [to the 1968 Tet Offensive] that there was no real opportunity for Nixon to engage in the change in strategy, even at the outset of his administration in 1969. The political backing simply no longer existed in the United States for what the opponents would regard as an enlargement of the war. I think that assessment of mine is substantiated by the fact that in April of '69—Arpil, excuse me, '70—when Nixon launched the incursion into Cambodia and fomented all the opposition which was manifested here in the United States about this so-called widening of the war that that indicates to me that it would have been impossible even in '69 to extended the war, as I think it should have been, into Laos and Cambodia. It should have been done much earlier. I think since the incursion into Cambodia was followed very shortly by congressional legislation which forbade the use of any of the U.S. forces in either Cambodia or Laos, I think that further indicates that Nixon did not have the opportunity from a domestic political standpoint to

adopt this change in strategy which Norm felt strongly about and which I do, too. So on that particular point I disagree with Norm. I don't think in '69 it would have been feasible from a political standpoint in the United States.

LC: Yeah, the domestic angle. Yes.

JM: Yes. So I just wanted to get that into the record, Laura.

LC: Very, very good.

JM: You had asked me at our last interview to review the military situation in Laos as to whether there were advances or retreats on the part of the forces allied with us. I started with the Meo in northeastern Laos, the tribal group which was aligned with the CIA in the so-called secret war in northeastern Laos against the Lao communists, the Pathet Lao, and the Vietnamese communists—I'll just call them the Vietnamese communists—in Laos. What essentially happened in northeastern Laos in a military sense in the years that I was there was that during the rainy season the Meo would advance to some extent in the war against the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese communists. Then the dry season would come along and the reverse would happen. The communists would un-do the advances of the Meo and drive them back. This was simply a back and forth each year. In I guess it was the late winter of [1967], my AID representative in northeastern Laos, Pop Buel began to tell me that General Vang Pao, the head of the Meo armed forces, was feeling very strongly that this repetition of advance and retreat in wet and dry seasons should not be repeated as that wet season approached because the Meo had suffered so many casualties over the year they were beginning to feel that the decimation of the Meo population was running counter to the Meo support for what Vang Pao was doing and was really not resulting in any substantial improvement overall in the security situation there. So Pop Buel reported this to me several times. I raised it at one of the daily country team meetings which Bill Sullivan, the ambassador, held, where all the heads of the American agencies operating in Laos were present for discussion on a daily basis from, I think, Monday through Saturday. The head of CIA who was then—I've forgotten his name suddenly. Let's see. Shackley, Ted Shackley, spoke up strongly and said, "Oh, no. That's not what I'm getting from my representatives." He says, "General Vang Pao is raring to go for another offensive

during the wet season against the communists." So there was this real dichotomy of reporting on what Vang Pao's views were to the different American agencies. So AID on the one hand and CIA on the other. Shackley, who was a pretty explosive individual and extremely able and certainly a man whose basic views on the war in Southeast Asia and mine were completely consonant, but sometimes he and I did disagree on what he did in Laos. I'm going to mention a couple of instances, Laura, here. I will say that some time in the 1980s I got a letter I think from a fellow who was preparing a biography of Shackley. Reading between the lines in that letter—this author indicated that he wanted to interview me about Shackley and any views and differences I may have had in Laos.

LC: Sure.

JM: But it was clear in this letter that he was going to write an anti-Shackley diatribe within his overall context of opposition to the whole U.S. policy in Vietnam and Laos. So I simply wrote back that despite the fact that Shackley and I had had differences that since I felt that his basic views and mine were correct and he had done what he thought was correct in the interest of supporting U.S. policy in Southeast Asia I simply declined to provide any information to him. I still think that was the right decision. Now I'll go to the differences that Shackley and I had.

LC: Sure.

JM: I've described the context of the one in the late winter and early spring of '68. So Bill Sullivan at that meeting said, "Well, we're getting diametrically opposed reporting on what Vang Pao's views are. So why don't you two and the deputy chief of mission, Bob Hurwitch,"—you asked me his name recently and I couldn't think of it—"get into a plane this afternoon and go up and talk to Vang Pao." Which is exactly—"find out exactly just what his views are." Well, we did just that. Vang Pao, in part I suppose being a good Oriental, but I think maybe almost anybody Occidental or Oriental would react the way he did. Here he was confronted by the two U.S. agencies who were providing major support both to his military operations and to his people in the form of refugee assistance, AID and CIA, both of which he leaned on strongly. So what he did when he was confronted with this situation was to hedge. He wouldn't come out strongly one way or the other. So Bill Sullivan's attempt to get Vang Pao's real views

really fizzled. As I say, I understand why Vang Pao acted the way he did. I think I would have, too. You don't bite either hand that feeds you, right?

LC: I think that's correct. This was not too much of a surprise, especially since it was sort of an ambush.

JM: Exactly.

LC: You just arrived one afternoon with no preparation. Yeah, so.

JM: Well, even had we, I don't think he could have changed his reply from either a strategic or a tactical standpoint. How could you side with either of them when each is pressing you directly?

LC: Right.

JM: Actually, I left Laos in the early part of that wet season. I left Laos in June. So I'm not absolutely sure what happened with respect to the normal wet season Meo offensive, whether it actually occurred. I have the impression that if it did it was not as extensive as it had been. But I can't really report on the outcome. You may be able to pick that up somewhere else, Laura.

LC: So, this would mean—

JM: Shackley came down so strongly at the country team meeting attacking me and my representative up there for what we were reporting that Bill Sullivan suddenly launched into him and said, "Shackley, you're not in Washington now. You're not on the Beltway. You're here. So, just tone down."

LC: Wow.

JM: He really set him back before all the country team members because of the way he was handling himself, which was sort of typical Ted Shackley explosive approach.

LC: Was it typical of Ambassador Sullivan as well?

JM: Well, Sullivan was always thoroughly in control of the country team. He could have a fiery temper also when he was aroused. Usually he didn't do it against a member of another U.S. agency head in Laos in front of others.

LC: No.

JM: But in this case he came down very hard on Shackley. The other difference that I had with Shackley arose with respect to northwestern Laos. Shackley encouraged

and assisted a move—this was in Houei Sai province, the northwestern most province—no, Houakhong I guess that was the name of the province—the northwestern most province of Laos, the one adjacent to China, Burma, and northeastern Thailand. This is the one I'm talking about to put it in proper context. Shackley encouraged what amounted to a raid by tribal forces CIA was supporting in that area on the town or village in the very northern part of that province which was actually very close to the Chinese border.

LC: Now is this the town that has the airstrip up there?

JM: No, no. That's the capital. That's in the southern part of the province, the one that has the airstrip there. Well, there were a lot of little airstrips but the biggest airstrip was the one you're talking about which was in the capital which was Ban Houei Sai was the capital and Houakhong was the province. Anyway, this raid brought out a number of ethnic Lao refugees from this town and I think didn't really accomplish anything. I wasn't in on the planning of this. I wasn't even aware of it until it had taken place, but what it amounted to was to increase our refugee roles without, I felt, any real gain from a military standpoint. I didn't think the mission accomplished much. I ex-post-facto expressed my adverse view of this operation in a cable to Washington. Bill Sullivan was either—I guess he got to Washington shortly there afterwards. I think he was on home leave, actually. Graham Martin who had been the ambassador to Thailand for several years, also a very strong personality and a very strong ambassador, his tour in Thailand was over and he had become special assistant to the secretary of state for refugees worldwide. There was so much interest in the U.S., including congressional, on refugees, particularly in Southeast Asia, that we had a special assistant to the secretary. He got a hold of Bill while he was there and said, "Tell Mendenhall not to bring these things up in the telegraphic traffic because it's possible and even likely that a copy may be leaked to Senator Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, who is very active in opposing even the Johnson administration. Not only active, but very vocal publicly in attacking the Johnson administration on refugee handling by the administration in Vietnam. This could extend it to Laos." I thought then that his concern was that I was indicating reluctance about picking up refugees in Laos, which I was in a way if it wasn't necessary to generate them and pick them up. Then he thought that Kennedy

could, of course, have taken that and played it. "Here the administration doesn't even want to support refugees in Laos, let alone Vietnam. Here's Mendenhall's cable."

LC: Right.

JM: So I don't think that I was totally wrong on that standpoint, but the other thing that Kennedy could have used it for, I suppose, which he did with respect to military activities in Vietnam, was the sole purpose of those activities was simply to generate refugees and they didn't accomplish anything militarily. I think that was true of the one in Laos. I didn't think it was true in Vietnam, but I can see how it could have been distorted and played adversely to the Johnson administration by Kennedy if he had gotten a hold of the copy of the cable. I don't think any copy ever got into his hands because I never had any repercussions. Bill Sullivan came back shortly thereafter from Washington to Laos and relayed Graham Martin's message to me on this. This is sort of incidental to the basic subject we were having, but you can see how these things can generate heat and how telegrams can generate fears and heat in Washington if they get into the wrong hands or are distorted. You get this today, every day in Washington, too.

LC: Indeed. It's a constant sort of battle to keep the lines of communication straight.

JM: Anyway, the military situation didn't change essentially in northwestern Laos during the three years I was there. The other place in northern Laos, which was a subject of contention, was the Plain of Jars. The Plain of Jars was a plateau area in the central part of northern Laos. We had talked about northeastern Laos where the Meo were and the northwestern Laos, which I just talked about. This area that I'm talking about now is northeast of Vientiane, the administrative capital, and southeast of Luang Prabang, the royal capital of Laos, and extended not quite to the Mekong River on the west because there were some mountains between the Plain of Jars and the Mekong. It extended east to the mountains of northeastern Laos. The eastern part of that was held by the communists. The western part was held by the armed forces of the neutralist wing of the government in Laos. The military forces were headed by General Kong Le, the diminutive guy who was a captain, had supported Souvanna Phouma during the—

LC: The big crisis. Yes.

JM: During the big crisis in 1960 when the neutralists became aligned at that point with the communists against the rightists. Later that switched to the neutralists became more aligned with the rightists. Anyway, what I'm talking about now, the military situation in the Plain of Jars, the neutralist forces held the west and the communist forces the east. There were changes of territorial control in the Plain of Jars over these years, but nothing of a major nature. We, through our military aid programs, supported the neutralists there. I remember going up there at one point and sitting there listening to the friendly artillery constantly firing toward the communists because we had a representative of our military aid division up there. So I went up to talk to him and become acquainted with him so that there was back and forth there but again, nothing of any great significance, Laura.

LC: Now, Joe, would these forces serving under Kong Le, would these be what are generally called the RLG, or the Royal Lao Government forces?

JM: Well, at that point both the rightist forces and the neutralist forces were considered part of the Royal Lao Government forces at that stage. Of course, earlier when the neutralists were aligned with the communists that was not true.

LC: Right.

JM: Now, moving farther south I'm going to move on to Khammouane Province, which is the northernmost province in that long narrower line of Laos which constitutes southern Laos, the northernmost province of the southern area.

LC: It's spelled how, Joe?

JM: K-H-A-M-M-O-U-A-N-E, of which the provincial capital is Thakhek, T-H-A-K-H-E-K.

LC: Yes. Yes, you're right.

JM: Anyway, in that area there was also back-and-forth exchange of control of areas relatively close to the main north-south road, which really paralleled the Mekong going south. At times the communists were within five or ten kilometers of that highway, which was a key highway. At other times they had driven back a bit. I visited that province fairly often and became fairly well acquainted with it. I'll have to interject a couple of little stories here, Laura, if you don't mind.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: There was a main hotel in Thakhek. The first two or three times we went there—I think Nonie was with me at least a couple of those times—we stayed in that hotel. This was a hotel which at one time had been under French management. I think they still had an expatriate French manager, but it had deteriorated over the years. The bedroom in which we stayed had a mosquito net on the bed, as was normal and as was necessary in Laos because of malarial mosquitoes. When one entered the room one could see cobwebs falling down from the mosquito net over the bed. Every time we were there one had to push the cobwebs aside. Of course, when one pulled the mosquito netting which had been tucked up on top and pulled it down for the night all kinds of dust and dead insects fell out of it. The shower facilities—there were no private bathrooms. The shower facilities were in a room with a bare cement floor. The way one took a shower was to take a dipper and dip it into a barrel of water and pour it over oneself. That was the principal hotel in Thakhek.

LC: Yummy.

JM: I had Nonie with me at least a couple of times. Then the next time I proposed to go to [that province] she said, "I am not going. I'm not going to stay in that hotel again."

LC: Yeah. This is not in the Michelin guide.

JM: I mentioned this to the Lao minister who was going with us, Ngon Sannanikone, our good friend. He says, "Oh, well, the province chief has a guest house. Let me get in touch with him and we can stay there." So that's what we did. So that was a much nicer facility than the hotel in which we had stayed earlier in Thakhek.

LC: Joe, can you describe the house at all, the guesthouse and the arrangement there?

JM: Oh, it certainly was not luxury or fancy in any way, but at least it didn't have cobwebs hanging over the bed. I can't remember what bathroom facilities we had, but they must have been an improvement over those in the hotel.

LC: I'm sure.

JM: Now, I'll have to describe another little incident, Laura. One of the times I

was in Thakhek with Nonie I had to go back to Vientiane. I don't know what had arisen, but we had gone down by plane—no, we were traveling by car. We traveled by car from Vientiane to other provinces on the way down. We went by car, but something came up in Vientiane. I had to go back and an airplane was sent down to bring me back. Nonie who at that stage—I shouldn't say just at that stage—Nonie all her life has not been very enamored of airplanes and airplane travel. She gets worried about it. I think still takes a Dramamine each time before she flies. She said, "Well, I'm going back by car." We had a chauffeur who was an employee of the AID mission. She said, "I'm going back with him. I'm not going back on the airplane. I don't want to use an airplane." Incidentally she did a lot of the traveling by helicopter in Laos with me.

LC: Really?

JM: She always loved helicopters and preferred them much over airplanes. Her irrational reason, Laura, was she said, "They're closer to the ground. I feel safer." Of course, they're actually much more dangerous than an airplane.

LC: But she quite—

JM: She did a lot of traveling by helicopter.

LC: She quite likes it?

JM: Oh, yes. She likes it. Because we always traveled in helicopters close to the ground with the door open so we could look out and see the results of my AID activities around the country. She liked that. Anyway, on this particular occasion, this was afternoon, I think, let's say about mid-afternoon. She said, "I'm going back to Vientiane by car with the chauffeur." Well, no, she was going back to the provincial capital between Thakhek and Vientiane. She said, "I'll get there because I can't get all the way to Vientiane." Bill Sullivan forbade travel by road at night for security reasons, which was quite correct. She said, "I'll go back and I'll stay in that provincial capital with our young USAID representative there and his wife." So I got in touch with him about six o'clock in the evening, which was Bill Sullivan's cutoff time for road travel and said, "Is Nonie there? Has my wife arrived?" He said, "No. She hasn't arrived." Well, I began to get worried, of course, and time passed. I stayed in touch with this guy and finally Nonie and the chauffeur arrived in this capital. I guess it was dark or after dark when they got there. What had happened was the car developed radiator

problems between Thakhek and this other provincial capital, which was called Borikhane. The radiator began to heat up and they found there was no water. They would stop at streams and put water in the radiator, but it would leak out very quickly. Finally Nonie said to the chauffeur, "I've got"—I guess it was not chewing gum but the Chiclet equivalent of chewing gum—"in my purse." So she and the chauffeur started chewing gum madly there. He stuck it into the holes in the radiator, which finally held enough water to get them back to the other provincial capital. I knew the communists were only about ten kilometers east of that highway. So I was pretty concerned until she got to Borikhane for her overnight stay.

LC: She's a genius. She's a genius.

JM: That was one of our little incidents which we always remember because of the security concerns.

LC: Oh, my goodness. Absolutely.

JM: Moving on further south, Savannakhet was the biggest city in southern Laos on the Mekong River, I would say about halfway down that narrower section of Laos. Then the other place of importance in southern Laos was Pakse, which was near the southern end, I think about thirty kilometers from the southern end which borders Cambodia. Anyway, a couple of provinces in between Savannakhet and Pakse, one was called Vapikham Thong which had no major population places but in which I found when I arrived in Laos, we and the CIA were mounting a major, shall I call it anti-insurgency campaign, partly economic, partly built up of security forces. East of there, it was a province in which the communists were quite active, but they didn't have the provincial capital. East of there was Saravane province, S-A-R-A-V-A-N-E, which when I arrived in Laos, Saravane the capital was in communist control. The Lao forces managed to liberate that provincial capital and relate it to our anti-insurgency campaign in Vapikham Thong. We built and partly re-built a disintegrated road between the capital of Vapikham Thong and Saravane. Either in the summer of '66 or summer of '67 Nonie and I, Ngon Sananikone, whom I mention so often, and I think his wife was with us. Keo Viphakone, who I was the minister for rural development, went down there to travel this road. I say "road." We did not build any paved roads in Laos. We built only roads that were compacted laterite, hopefully to a standard that would stand up

during the tropical wet season, but as I think I have said before, we were trying to bring Laos from the 12th century into the 19th century, not the 20th century. There wasn't enough traffic to warrant putting in paved highways. Anyway, we traveled this road from the capital of Vapikham Thong to Saravane, visited there with the province chief. When I got back to Vientiane within a few days I read a CIA report that six hundred Viet Cong had crossed that highway at some point a few days before we traveled it. So again, ex-post-facto we felt considerable security concern over what we had done since we had our wives with us as well.

LC: Joe, can I just ask how much security planning and pre-planning would be done before you and Nonie would go?

JM: Well, we were generally cognizant of the security situation around the country on a daily basis. So we usually knew although we didn't always. In this case this report from CIA reported what had happened two or three weeks earlier. I wasn't aware that report hadn't even been—I don't think CIA had even acquired the information when we made the trip or otherwise we probably would not have made it.

LC: Right. Would you go accompanied by any kind of security?

JM: No. We were not accompanied by any security forces. The only concern was that we should not travel at night. One took some chances. One realized that.

LC: Yes.

JM: But one made himself or herself as completely aware of the security situation as possible before planning one of these trips. Laura, we're running a little longer if I may I have just one or two more places to mention after Saravane.

LC: Yes, please. Yes.

JM: The other place, just one more place, which I wanted to discuss was Bolovens Plateau, which was a high area east of Pakse, the principal population center in southern Laos. The Bolovens Plateau was partly controlled by friendly forces, partly by enemy forces. Again, the question of control shifted back and forth in areas there during the years that I served in Laos. After this visit to Saravane, we were going down into the Bolovens Plateau and onto Pakse. At that point we knew that General Pasouk, the Lao government general, the Lao general for whom I had the highest respect, the other one being General Vang Pao, the Meo. I had high respect for Pasouk. He had met us

in Saravane, joined us for lunch at the province chief's. He had just captured the principal village on the northern edge of the Bolovens Plateau and suggested that we stop there. He said, "I don't want the women going there because there are still snipers around and it could be dangerous." So we traveled by helicopter from Saravane farther south. The women went from Saravane directly to Pakse. We men stopped at this place where Pasouk had recently captured and spent, I suppose, an hour or so there looking over the situation. I point this out—this was a place that changed hands from time to time. I can't remember the name of it now, but I just know it was the principal village on the northern edge. I also remember, Laura, after we left there, flying over the Bolovens Plateau by helicopter. There were three instances where we could see three waterfalls at one time, absolutely gorgeously beautiful from a physical standpoint. I don't think I've ever seen that many waterfalls in one area in my life. Three different instances in that brief trip when we could see three different waterfalls at one time, absolutely remarkable.

LC: Yes. That's incredible. Yes. It must be beautiful.

JM: It is a gorgeous area.

LC: Yeah.

JM: Laura, a little farther east from Bolovens Plateau is the town or village of Attopeu. Most of that province was controlled by the communists, but Attopeu during all my time in Laos was an enclave controlled by the government forces. It remained that way, under precarious control. I don't think it amounted to much in any strategic sense.

LC: Attopeu itself remained in government hands.

JM: Yes. That is A-T-T-O-P-E-U.

LC: Yes. I'm actually looking at a map just now. So your thought is that most of the area east of that town and therefore along the border with South Vietnam and—

JM: All of that area was under communist control and some of the area west of Attopeu was under communist control because it was an enclave within a communist-controlled area.

LC: So did you visit there?

JM: I never did visit Attopeu, no. Because I don't think we had much activity—

the fact that the government held it, I think it held it on the sufferance of the communists rather than anything else. I don't think it really amounted to anything of any significance in a political security or economic sense whatsoever.

LC: It rather sounds that way.

JM: Yeah. That the communists might have taken it at any point they wished to.

JM: Yeah.

LC: Yeah.

JM: Laura, while it's in my mind I'll mention one other incident involving Nonie, if it's all right with you.

LC: If it's all right with her, it's all right with me.

JM: I don't think it was this visit. It was another visit to southern Laos. We were up on the Bolovens Plateau actually at a village which we had controlled, I think, pretty much during all the time we were there, sort of near the southwestern edge of the plateau. The Bolovens Plateau is inhabited by tribal peoples, not by ethnic Lao. General Pasouk was with us this time and we were seated in this tribal area around a big crock of *lao hai*. The Lao have two alcoholic drinks, one called *lao lao*, which is a distilled rice drink so strong that I never minded drinking it out of the dirty glasses in which it was normally served. But *lao hai* is a fermented rice drink, not strong enough to kill germs. It always was permitted to ferment in one of these big crocks standing, oh, I don't know, two to three feet high with the husks of the rice floating around on top and several big bamboo straws in it. These straws were passed around among everybody who was taking a drink out of it. As the level of the *lao hai* went down un-distilled water, non-distilled water, would be poured in to bring it back up to the top, which we knew was dangerous. I always tried if I could to avoid getting involved in *lao hai*. I couldn't always for diplomatic reasons. I did have severe cases of dysentery in Laos I always attributed to drinking *lao hai*, but on this particular occasion the bamboo straw was being passed around the Americans, the Lao government officials traveling with us from Vientiane, the local officials, including the tribal officials. Each time one took a drink the chief of the tribal officials would unbutton the shirt and put an X mark on the chest with some kind of charcoal. He got to Nonie and then he started to unbutton her

blouse.

LC: Goodness.

JM: General Pasouk said, “Uh-uh. No. Stop. Stop.” He stopped him there and passed it on to the next male, but Nonie almost got her blouse opened, not in any lascivious sense, but just to have this X charcoaled on her chest by the local tribal chief.

LC: She sounds like a great sport. She was good humored.

JM: Well, I wound up with these personal incidents.

LC: Well, I’m sure she was good humored about all of this.

JM: Oh, yes. Everybody was.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [35] of [57]
Date: March 10, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. It's the tenth of March 2006 today. As usual I am in Lubbock and the ambassador is speaking from Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: You wanted to, I think, help sketch out some of the economic terrain of Laos with which you were going to be deeply involved as AID administrator there.

JM: Exactly, Laura. We've already, I think, laid the political and military overview in Laos at the time of my arrival. So I think it's useful as background to get a picture of the economy of that country. Laos economically, as I like to put it, was still essentially a country in the 12th century. It had been under French control for several decades before it acquired independence in the 1950s, but the French had always given priority in Indochina to Vietnam and Cambodia. They consistently regarded Laos as a backwater among the three countries which constituted Indochina. The main thing that the French did in Laos was to construct a basic road system connecting the main parts of the country, partly paved, but by no means entirely paved. Even where it had been paved, by the years of neglect and fighting in Laos much of that road system had deteriorated. For example, the road connecting Vientiane, the administrative capital with Luang Prabang, the royal capital, which the French had opened up, had deteriorated very, very seriously as roads do in that part of the world. Excuse me. Many parts of it had reverted completely to jungle so that it was utterly impassable.

LC: Really?

JM: There was still a road system which connected Vientiane with the principal towns in the south, but where it had been paved much of that pavement had deteriorated. Often when a paved road begins to deteriorate it becomes worse than a dirt road has ever been because all you do is bump along between little segments of pavement. It's really completely bone-shaking to travel. When I was in Laos in '65-'68 the only paved road was a some twenty-kilometer stretch between Vientiane and the village on the Mekong

where one crossed the Mekong by ferry to go into Thailand. Since Laos is a land-locked country any exports and imports had to pass through Thailand. They were totally cut off from Vietnam at that point. Therefore that paved road was used a good deal. Then there was no bridge across the Mekong after one arrived at this village south of Vientiane on the Mekong called Thadeua. One had to get on a rudimentary ferry and cross the river and then get into Thailand where there was a good road system. They had the AID program in Thailand. The U.S. AID program had constructed a road which connected all of northeastern Laos, the main arterial road connecting northeastern, excuse me, northeastern Thailand, not Laos, northeastern Thailand with the road system from Bangkok north. So there was a good road system in Thailand.

LC: Joe, where was the crossing that you're speaking about?

JM: Well, on the Lao side the village it was called Thadeua, T-H-A-D-E-U-A, and on the Thai side it was Nong Kai. One could get a train in Nong Kai to go to Bangkok in addition to the paved road which went all the way to Bangkok, as I've just indicated. But even passengers who wanted to take the train—this used to happen to my wife and my youngest daughter who had braces. Once a month the braces had to be tightened. It was five minutes work but there were no dentists in Laos. So she had to go to Bangkok every month. My wife used to take her. I took her occasionally but my wife took her most of the time. During the first year or so that we were there they would travel by overnight train from Nong Kai to Bangkok, but when they got to the Lao village on the Lao side of the Mekong they would take a canoe to cross the Mekong to get to the train and then take the overnight train on down to Bangkok.

LC: Oh, my goodness. Now, that twenty-kilometer stretch that you're talking about which was relatively well maintained and was paved—

JM: That was a good road. It may have—I suspect during earlier years in the U.S. AID program, had been restored. That would be my guess. I don't remember that specifically as a fact, but that's certainly my guess.

LC: Just looking at a map, is that the road that followed the Mekong along down through the peninsula?

JM: Yeah. It follows the Mekong to the Vientiane down to this village, Thadeua.

LC: Sure. Sure.

JM: Then one crossed either by canoe or by rudimentary car ferry to Thailand. I think since the communists have taken over, the Australians have financed the construction of a bridge over the Mekong at that point. So there is now a bridge. I heard just the other day by telephone from our mutual friend Tom Barnes that a second bridge is being built across the Mekong from Thailand to Savannakhet, which is in the south-central part of Laos. So assuming that one is completed there will be two bridges now about forty years after I've left Laos. Back to the economy of Laos, the economy was basically an agricultural one on a—what's the word we say—self-supporting basis, sustenance agriculture. Sustenance is not the word.

LC: Subsistence. Subsistence agriculture?

JM: Subsistence. That's the word I'm searching for, subsistence agriculture. The Lao had been traditionally self-sufficient in production of their food staple, rice, but by the 1960s they no longer were because so many of the men had been taken from the countryside for the three armed forces of the rightists, the neutralists, and the communists, the Pathet Lao, that they were no longer able to produce enough rice to supply the needs of the country. The country when we were there had a population estimated at three million or under. So it was not a heavily-populated country at all, but it couldn't even produce enough rice any longer for that number of people. I might say at this point that in rice culture, paddy wetland rice culture, women can do all of the work and do all of the work, in fact, except for plowing. They evidently are not strong enough to control the water buffalo to do the plowing.

LC: Yeah.

JM: Since the men were off in the various armed forces a lot of land had become fallow and the country no longer was self-sufficient even in this basic staple, rice. There was no industry in the country. I think there was a very small tin mine in south-central Laos. The total exports of the country when we were there were only about a million dollars per year. Since the U.S. AID program was fifty million dollars per year when I was there you can see the contrast between what the country was earning and what was being spent in Laos by the U.S. government in the way of assistance. Of course, part

of that fifty million dollars went to pay U.S. personnel who were assisting and part of it went for commodities and other services. But that gives an indication right there of how low-level the economy actually was at that point. I also mentioned the government budget—one of its principal sources and perhaps the principal source of revenue—I can't remember the figures now—was a tax on the gold trade. That's an interesting one, too. At that time the U.S. government was holding the price of gold at thirty-five dollars an ounce. So that's what gold was sold for by governments on the commercial market. In Laos importers would buy gold at thirty-five dollars an ounce and then sell it to businesses interested commercially. In Asia a lot of savings were in gold and jewelry. A lot was bought by Indians and others in Asia and [gold] could be sold on the commercial market at a very substantial markup. Well, the Lao government imposed a tax on this gold trade and that was its principal source of revenue. They did get revenue also from customs duties on the imports that came into the country, but again the government ran a substantial budgetary deficit, of course. The way that the foreign aid community had arrived—the point at which the foreign aid community had arrived at with respect to sustaining the currency and the imports of the country was through something called the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund. In the late 1950s and early '60s there had been chaos in the currency market in Laos with high inflation and lots of black market activity. Excuse me. By the time I arrived, this fund had been set up. I inherited it and it operated in this way. It would make available foreign exchange to any Lao who wanted it and who was prepared to pay five-hundred kip for a dollar. Now, the kip was the Lao currency. Five-hundred kip for a dollar. Anybody in Laos could buy dollars if they had the kip for imports or any purpose whatsoever. It was a free market in [dollars] but in addition to that there was also operated an import program at about half that exchange rate to cover the staples needed to sustain the population. Rice, fuel, like gasoline and certain other staple products were on this second list of imports. Of course, access to that was restricted because of the limited number of commodities available on the eligible list. So there were two exchange rates, 275 kip to a dollar for the basic products, 500 kip to a dollar for any other purpose for which a Lao had the kip to buy it. So with a free market in dollars at five hundred kip per dollar there was no longer any black market and really no longer any inflation because the kip was

available. Now this foreign exchange operations fund was supported by five foreign donors. The United States was by far the biggest donor to it. Great Britain, Australia, Japan, and France were the other four donors. France was, as the French often operate, not really a donor because all it did was to transfer from francs into kip to meet its local currency needs for its embassy and other activities in Laos. So there was no net addition by the French to the foreign exchange available. They would have had to bring that in anyway. They didn't really contribute anything net to the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund, but joined it under this typical French concoction in order to try to show that they were also a donor to this fund in maintaining the basic standard of living of the Lao. The other donors made real contributions. As I say, the United States was the biggest contributor and was always looked to by the other donors as the residual donor if any increase in the funds needed to maintain the free market in foreign exchange were needed. That would depend among other things on the size of the Lao budgetary deficit. If the Lao government operated in ever-increasing deficits then that was generating kip into the economy and therefore was increasing the needs for foreign exchange. So this was one of the main problems that I had to deal with there was to try to restrain the constant increase in kip available to buy these freely available dollars in the foreign exchange operations because the United States would constantly have to increase the size of its aid program unless we tried to maintain some control on that. You can see that that provided room for conflict between the AID mission and the Lao government as well as with other donors, which I'll get into later when we deal with the AID program in detail.

LC: Okay.

JM: But I lay this out as the main means of financing imports into Laos, these two devices, one with dollars freely available at five-hundred kip to the dollar and the other a restricted list of commodities available at a substantially lower exchange rate. When I arrived in Laos the U.S. was beginning to try to eliminate certain of the commodities on this restricted list in order to again keep the demands on U.S. aid as low as possible, plus the fact that certain of the commodities on that restricted list were being imported into Laos at this subsidized exchange rate of 275 kip to the dollar and then re-exported to Thailand at a profit by the Lao importers, one of these being rice. Rice would

be imported from Thailand at the subsidized rate by private importers and then resold to Thailand at a profit. So we had a real problem trying to keep these things under control. As I say, when I arrived we were in the process of cutting back on that list. I continued this approach during the time I was there and it always led to real battles with the Lao government, which wanted to maintain these commodities at a subsidized cheap price for the local populace. Now, Laura, let me see. Looking at other aspects of the economy there was no telephone system in Laos, no inter-urban telephones, if I may use that phrase, "inter-urban." There was a telephone system in Vientiane itself. There were in much of the country no roads at all. There were no roads to northeastern Laos whatsoever. There had been one which went across the Plain of Jars going from the Vientiane-Luang Prabang road about halfway between the two cities going east across the Plain of Jars, but much of that area was under the control of the communists. That was no longer really accessible. In any case it didn't really connect with the main areas of activity in northeastern Laos. Everything in northeastern Laos had to go in from Vientiane by air since there were no surface communications whatsoever. As I will explain as we get into the AID program since we had major activity in that area we had this very substantially expensive way of transporting commodities into that area of the country.

LC: Okay. What about northwestern Laos up near the Burma border?

JM: Beyond Luang Prabang into northwestern Laos no roads. No.

LC: Nothing. Okay.

JM: Again, one had to use air. Excuse me, one could use the Mekong, particularly at certain seasons. During the dry season the Mekong would become too low in certain spots, even for water transport. So the Mekong was available as an alternative from Vientiane to Luang Prabang and Luang Prabang on into the northwest only during the wet season. It could not be used during parts of the dry season. So you see, we had to depend a lot on air activity for movement of both personnel and goods to various parts of the country. Educational system, again the French had done relatively little. Any Lao who went to high school under the French to *lycée*, which is somewhat higher than high school in the States in part, as you know, had to go to Hanoi for his high school education. So there were no high schools in Laos. On health,

a rudimentary hospital in Vientiane and I don't think there were any facilities of any consequence anywhere else in the country. Aside from the road system the principal thing that the French had left from the colonial area or the protectorate area to use the proper term, was some government buildings. During the years of hostility among the Lao even they had deteriorated seriously. So as you can see this was a country which was very rudimentary as far as we Americans were concerned, as far as the modern world is concerned. As I used to indicate, we wanted to try to bring it into the 19th century from the 12th century, not the 20th century.

LC: You still had your work cut out for you.

JM: Absolutely. There, I think, is a brief overview of the economy of the country. I don't know whether you can think of any other aspects in which I could elucidate which I don't think of in the present, Laura, or not.

LC: There had been some small narrow-gauge rail lines built through Vietnam and into Cambodia. Any rail lines coming into Laos?

JM: No. No. No rail lines in Laos.

LC: Nothing.

JM: No. No. None whatsoever. No.

LC: Was there an attempt ever by the French to develop plantation economy work there in the same way that they had done in South Vietnam and Cambodia?

JM: No. No.

LC: Why would you say that is? Is it because of the terrain?

JM: I think the basic reason was the one I've given. The French always look to Laos as a backwater and weren't about to extend anything very substantial in the way of investment into the country.

LC: This was primarily—

JM: Privately or by the government. The opportunities in the private sector for making money through a plantation economy were so much greater in Vietnam and to a degree in Cambodia than in land-locked Laos. There just wasn't an incentive to try to.

LC: Partly because—

JM: Also, the population was not that great. All the factors which go into production were so much more prevalent and available in Vietnam and as I say to a lesser

extent in Cambodia. There was no real incentive to look to that kind of development in Laos.

LC: What about cross-border relations with Thailand in, let's say, southern and south-central Laos to the south of Vientiane? Were there problems across the border between Thailand and Laos at any point?

JM: The only way to get across, as I've indicated, was by canoe or rudimentary ferry. There were no bridges during the era of French control. The French also—any connection that they tried to make transportation-wise was with other parts of Indochina. They didn't want to connect the country with Thailand at all.

LC: As a political move.

JM: As a political—yeah. For political reasons. Exactly. After all there had been a rather long history of contention between the Thai and the Lao and between the Burmese and the Lao. So that the French inherited this basic Lao suspicion of both of those larger countries. Certainly there was no incentive, no reason that the French wanted to try to develop communications between Laos on the one hand and Thailand and Burma on the other hand.

LC: I wonder, Joe, if you can say anything about the source of this French attitude toward the Laos. Was it based more on the appreciation the French might have had for the Sino-cized Vietnamese culture and the sort of Indian-type Cambodian culture and Laos being riven by tribal distinctions and lots of terrain features that made the different tribes isolated and not really heavily influenced by either China or the sort of Indianized cultures? Did that have something to do with it?

JM: I would be dubious, Laura, that that was much of a factor in the situation. Certainly the Vietnamese were more developed than either of the other two countries, partly because they'd had an older and longer relationship with China than Laos and Cambodia had had with the Indian type of culture. I think so many factors conduced to French priority to Vietnam over both Cambodia and Laos. The choice between Cambodia and Laos, as I've indicated, was a choice from the French standpoint to Cambodia.

LC: Also as you point out the profits to be made in the colonial context were really with the other two countries rather than with Laos.

JM: That's right. Even from a French governmental standpoint, a strategic standpoint, certainly Vietnam and Cambodia were more significant. Their main area of concern in that sector with respect to Laos was to keep the Thai from moving against Laos in any way.

LC: Right. Right. Very interesting. Well, you mention that there really wasn't any kind of telephone system outside of Vientiane itself. What connections internationally were there from Vientiane? Could you get a line to Bangkok for example, or not?

JM: I don't recall that we could. I don't think we ever spoke to Bangkok by telephone. So I don't think there was any such connection, Laura. We had our own radio system of communication in the AID mission with both Bangkok, where we had an AID representative of the Lao mission stationed in Bangkok all the time because all of our cargo came through the port of Bangkok. So he was there to facilitate the movement of that stuff to Laos.

LC: I see.

JM: We had radio communication with all the areas within Laos in which we had American personnel. As a matter of fact, one of the requirements was that every evening about six o'clock—this was a requirement laid down by the ambassador—that every one of the outposts of the AID mission would contact Vientiane to make sure that everything was still okay there from a security standpoint. We used very extensively our own radio communication system.

LC: Joe, what can you tell me about the embassy's communication systems? Were those also radio rather than any kind of landline?

JM: I don't think the embassy had any and I don't think the embassy ever was able to talk by telephone with Washington—I don't recall—or with capitals in the area. It was always by the embassy's own telegraphic system, or actually it was radio telegraphic system, I should say.

LC: That's very interesting. Okay. Well, do you have other observations that you can make?

JM: No. I don't think so, Laura. Some may emerge as we discuss the program. As far as I'm concerned unless you have other questions I think I'm ready to move into

my job in Laos now.

LC: Well, let's do that. Maybe a preface to that would be to tell something about the AID mission there as you found it. Who was your predecessor there?

JM: My predecessor was Charlie Mann who was transferred to Vietnam to run the then biggest AID mission of the U.S. in the world. He was transferred in 1965 to Saigon. Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, asked Washington to assign me as his successor. Charlie had been there in Laos, I think, for probably two or three years. Interestingly enough, Laura, when I left after three years Charlie Mann again succeeded me as the AID mission chief. He had run into a problem in Vietnam. He and Henry Cabot Lodge did not get along for some reason, who was then the ambassador. So Charlie didn't last too long in Vietnam. Then went, I think, to the Congo as AID mission chief in Africa. Then after I left Laos in '68 he was asked to return to Laos. So he was both my predecessor and my successor.

LC: That's very interesting. Did you have a chance to speak with him before he left and a briefing period?

JM: Yes. I did. I think he had left—I'm sure he had left when I arrived, but I think I saw him in Washington when I was being briefed to go to Laos. I think I had a very substantive conversation with him about the AID mission. I'm sure I got my original basic facts about the AID mission and the program from conversations with Charlie in Washington and of course from the Lao desk in the AID headquarters in Washington.

LC: Well, you've mentioned that the AID mission in Saigon was the largest.

JM: The one in Laos was the second biggest mission.

LC: Second. Second biggest.

JM: Both in terms of dollars and with respect to personnel. Our AID program, as I've indicated several times, during my tenure there was around fifty million dollars a year which, of course, in today's dollars would be very substantially higher than that. As far as personnel was concerned, we had about five hundred Americans in the AID mission. We had six hundred third-country nationals by that expression which was used so much within the AID agency, but it's sort of a foreign term I think too many Americans. Third-country nationals were people from other nationalities outside the

host country nationals. Ours were mainly Thai and Filipino. We had about six hundred of them on the payroll. We had about two thousand Lao on our payroll. We were the second biggest employer of labor in the country after the Lao government. That shows you how big a factor we were in Laos.

LC: Wow.

JM: In addition to these people who were on our payroll, we had contracts with several American outfits which also had a considerable number of people operating in Laos. We had two air contracts, one with Continental Airlines and the other with Air America, which was a CIA-created airline and operated in a semi-private way, but it was under CIA control. We had a contract with the International Voluntary Service, which I'll explain what that is. This was a Peace Corps-type of operation, nominally private, which had been established even before the Peace Corps, which operated mainly in Vietnam and Laos but to some degree elsewhere, I think in a few countries in Africa. As a Peace Corps-type activity, the young people who manned the agency were volunteers. There were some permanent people at the top of it and the man at the top of it when I arrived in Laos was Arthur Gardiner, who had been the first deputy director and director of the AID mission in Vietnam during the time I was there. So I knew Arthur very well. As head of the International Voluntary Service he was stationed in Washington, but he used to come to Laos quite frequently. I knew him well. Arthur and I had some differences over IVS (International Voluntary Service) because IVS was funded totally by AID as far as Laos was concerned. I assume that's the way it operated in other countries, but we always had between eighty and a hundred International Voluntary Service—I say IVS, the acronym for it. We always had between eighty and a hundred of these young people in Laos. I might just say while we're talking about this program that I took the approach that these young people should fit substantively into our program, should serve our program needs, whereas the IVS philosophy, and Arthur Gardiner pushed it very strongly, was that these people were volunteers who should be able to do their own thing in the country. That was the biggest point of difference. Arthur and I were always struggling over this one. I wanted volunteers who would fit into the program and he wanted them to be able to do what IVS and they, the volunteers, thought they should be doing on a voluntary basis. I say voluntary, but

they got a modest salary of I think of about a hundred dollars a month, but they were essentially volunteers. I think I prevailed in many respects of this although this substantive point of difference although not totally. Some of these people, in my view, really contributed nothing to Laos or to U.S. activities in Laos from any real assessment standpoint, but a lot of them were very good people. We had them stationed all around the country. They served in development, particularly in the agricultural area, in assistance to refugees, in the education field. So, a lot of them fitted very nicely into our program and a lot of them proved to be very good people. As a matter of fact a lot of them, at the end of their IVS contractual service, joined AID. We took them on as direct-hire employees. They were so useful to us. So we had quite a number of those in Laos. So as you can see they, I think in a net sense, made a real contribution.

LC: You've mentioned that IVS was actually developed before the Peace Corps program.

JM: I think I'm correct in that. I think it was in the late '50s that it started.

LC: Yeah. I think so, too. Did you have Peace Corps personnel in Laos?

JM: No. We did not have any Peace Corps, nor were there any in Vietnam during that era because it was IVS which operated in those two countries rather than the Peace Corps. We also had a contract, the terms of which I'll get into later when we're discussing our program, with a Filipino organization called Operation Brotherhood in the health field. We had, I suppose, somewhere between fifty and a hundred Filipinos in that program. As I say, I'll get into that. In addition to our direct-hire roster, which as you can see from what I've said was extensive, we had a lot of people under contract to add to the staffing needs in Laos. So it was a very major operation. From my own standpoint, of course, I had never managed anything bigger before that than I guess the political section in Saigon which probably had, oh, I don't know, six, eight or ten people. So this was a vastly different type of operation for me. I did not know when I got there whether I was a manager in the real sense of the term or not.

LC: Right. You were about to find out.

JM: I think I can fairly say without boasting that by the end of the three years I felt that I had served the managerial capacity very, very well. It was also a learning

experience for me, but I think I managed to get the mission, its direction, its program, its strategy under control relatively quickly.

LC: Joe, one thing—excuse me, go ahead, Joe.

JM: You go ahead with your question.

LC: I was going to ask whether you think it might be useful at this point to give some sense of the internal organization.

JM: That's what I was about to do, Laura.

LC: Okay. Mm-hmm.

JM: I had sixteen people reporting to me as the AID mission director. I think most experts in the managerial field would say that's too wide a span of control, but I was much younger then, very active. I did work six-and-a-half days a week for the three years I was in Laos, but I think that I was able to control the activities, or direct the activities I should say, of these sixteen divisions quite well. It will become obvious as we describe the program what these divisions were, Laura. I don't think I'll go into that detail now.

LC: Okay.

JM: From the managerial standpoint it was a very wide range of activities. We worked in every field in Laos in which there was a Lao minister except two. One was the so-called Ministry of Cults, in other words, the ministry of religious affairs. Obviously we stayed out of that one. The second was the Ministry of Communications, which did not include transportation, just communications, the main concern of which was the postal system in Laos, since there wasn't much in the way of other telecommunications in the country. We did not really get involved in that one. As a matter of fact, at one point the Lao minister of finance asked me to finance the construction of a new post office in Vientiane. I politely but firmly declined that request. So we stayed out of that one. He proceeded to finance it from his own budget. Of course, as I've indicated, budgetary expenditures by the Lao government ultimately had an impact on the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund, to which we were the main contributor. In a sense we helped indirectly to finance what I refused to finance directly.

LC: Joe, let me ask a little bit more about the financing of this, but from the American side. Was the funding for this AID program in Laos or the overall project

in Laos and the one in Vietnam, was it a source of contention of Washington?

JM: Oh, sure, because we had to get annual appropriations of funds by the Congress so that was always a major battle, particularly in the House of Representatives. Laura, much later when we get to my service in Washington in 1968 and '69 when I had to deal with Congress in that respect, particularly with Congressman Otto Passman of Louisiana who had for quite a number of years been the chairman of the Foreign Operations Sub-Committee of the House Appropriations Committee and was a really tough guy to deal with as far as the AID agency was concerned. For many years the AID people had been subjected to severe interrogation and almost harassment when they tried to get funds through him, but we'll go into that, Laura, when I get to Washington later in our talk.

LC: It's useful for people listening to this part of the interview to know that that certainly is occurring in the background.

JM: Oh, yes, because Congress obviously controlled our appropriations and the amount per country. Of course, the executive branch of the government presented its views and tried to get certain amounts per country, but ultimately the final decision was a congressional one. This is true of course throughout the government. The power of the purse is the basic power of Congress, which it always has and as we know what happened in the Vietnam War, in what was really a much greater problem as far as the U.S. was concerned, ultimately was the power of the purse by the Congress, which turned off U.S. support for the Vietnam War and which could today in the case of the Iraq War do the same thing. The power of the purse is extremely strong, obviously.

LC: Let me ask one other sort of general question which will set up, I think, our later discussions. I think it's something you alluded to before, but AID was positioned within the State Department, but was it seen by professional Foreign Service officers such as yourself as a kind of stepchild or what was the perception within the State Department of AID and of Foreign Service officers who worked for it?

JM: Well, AID was folded into the State Department in an administrative sense, as I recall, in the early 1960s under the Kennedy administration. Prior to that, it had been an independent agency working closely with State but not directly under the control of the Secretary of State. When the decision was made to place it within the

Department of State, this brought it under the direction and control of the Secretary of State, but below that level the administrator of the AID agency—and that was the title of the head of the agency in Washington—was the equivalent to the deputy secretary, or I think at that time the undersecretary and later the deputy Secretary of State. So that it was only the Secretary of State in the State Department who could ultimately give direction. So even though it had been folded into the State Department in many respects, it seemed to operate pretty much as a separate agency from the State Department, even though it had been folded nominally within the State Department. Now as far as regular Foreign Service officers of the State Department serving in positions within Washington or abroad of the AID agency, the Agency for International Development—Laura, I'll put that in this context. I would say probably most Foreign Service officers, including promotion boards, always tend to look at assignment of Foreign Service officers to any agency of the government outside of the State Department as something of lesser importance than assignments within the State Department. Now this is not acknowledged by them, but is a psychological factor in all approaches by Foreign Service officers, including the promotion boards, which are manned by them.

LC: Yes.

JM: Somewhat to the disadvantage, I think, of Foreign Service officers—definitely I would say to the disadvantage of Foreign Service officers assigned outside the State Department. I think it's something to deplore, but it's a factor which is there. When I got the offer in 1965 to go to Laos as the AID mission director I was enthusiastic about doing it because I was ready to get out of Washington.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: I was going into one of the two countries on which the U.S. was focusing so much at that time, Vietnam and Laos. So it seemed like a very good assignment. Perhaps looking at it from a career standpoint, maybe I should have been more hesitant to accept it for the reason I have just indicated. But that's just the way the bureaucratic system operates. I suspect it is still true. It was certainly true throughout the years I served. As I've indicated much earlier I served with the Marshall Plan in Iceland during my two years there from '49 to '51. I think that's the

kind of attitude that prevailed among the career Foreign Service officers, even at that time. I know it did. So it's something that had existed for a long time and continued to exist and I suspect still does today.

LC: Well, Joe, as you've mentioned I think either last session or the one previous, you look back fondly on your time in Laos as you do on your time in Vietnam. Really at the end of the day you were made an ambassador so I think they overlooked whatever side-stepping they may have thought you had done. You in your own mind are quite happy with the decision that you made.

JM: Yeah. Well, Laura at that point perhaps I should add this comment.

LC: Okay.

JM: The choice of ambassadors to a country is not really made by the career Foreign Service. That is made ultimately in the White House by the president and his staff. Recommendations, of course, come forth from the State Department. In that sense the factor that I have just been discussing with you does represent a bit of a disadvantage I suppose, but ultimately the decision of the president, of course, isn't based on that factor except to the extent recommendations are made by the State Department to him.

LC: Right. Well, maybe later on—

JM: Even at the top of the State Department, I think the Secretary of State would not be particularly influenced by that factor.

LC: Well, maybe later on we can talk about—

JM: But Laura, I will say and just let me add to the point you have just raised. What you were referring to as I look back on my assignments in Vietnam and Laos as the most challenging in my career, much more so than my assignment as ambassador to Madagascar. I therefore—and I learned much more in those two posts since they were the heart of U.S. foreign policy attention at the time I was serving there—learned much more than I would have otherwise. I have no regrets about having made the decision to serve as director of the AID mission in Laos at all.

LC: Yeah. I can't imagine that you would. Maybe at some point we can talk about the nomination process and the difficulties that sometimes must arise for Foreign Service officers when they have a political appointee as the ambassador rather than someone with a great deal of experience, which is not so far something I think that you

have had in your career up to 1965 or even in 1968 had to deal with. Because, if I think back, almost all of the ambassadors to whom you reported went overseas were career Foreign Service officers.

JM: Except for my initial year or so in Switzerland. There I had a political appointee.

LC: I remember that now. That's right. Well, let's take a break there, Joe.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [36] of [57]
Date: April 14, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the fourteenth of April 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking from his home in Nevada. First of all, thanks again, Joe, for your time.

Joseph Mendenhall: Absolutely.

LC: Joe, let's talk a little bit, if you don't mind, about the organization which you took over in 1965, the AID operation in Laos.

JM: Fine, Laura. I was the director of the AID mission and I had a deputy director, the number two in the mission. There were also two assistant directors. This is the organizational setup that I inherited. It was not what I had devised myself.

LC: Right.

JM: The two assistant directors were actually each heads of divisions. I think I indicated there were about sixteen divisions there if I can remember all of them. They were actually heads of divisions, but they were considered a bit more senior than the other heads of divisions. One was the head of the training division, which not training AID personnel, but training Lao to better fulfill their governmental functions. The other was the head of the Rural Development Program. The other divisions, to the extent that I can remember them, I had a Public Works Division. I also had a separate Bureau of Public Roads division. The Bureau of Public Roads was, let's see. It was a unit I think then in the Department of Interior, I believe. We had I think something like ten or a dozen, maybe even more personnel from the Bureau of Public Roads seconded to the AID mission in Laos. Their primary job was to build up the Ministry of Public Works of the Lao government and to reconstruct and reopen the road between Vientiane, the administrative capital of Laos, and Luang Prabang, the royal capital located well north of there. It was the road which had once been built by the French, but had during the years of warfare and disturbances had so deteriorated that most of it

was no longer viable at all. I remember seeing a section of it, I suppose, about fifty miles north of Vientiane before it had been refurbished and actually the jungle had completely taken over the road. It was utterly impassable, which gives an idea of the state to which it had reverted over the years of troubles. We had this Bureau of Public Roads division in addition to the Public Works Division, which was—well, I might just pause at the moment and give some indication of the activities of that division because in some ways it was utterly unique as far as AID missions were concerned. It was headed by a fellow by the name of Tom Cole who did not have an engineering degree. As a matter of fact, the first decision I ever had to make with respect to the AID mission was while I was still in Washington after I had been nominated as director, but had not yet left Washington to go to Laos. This fellow happened to be in Washington and he came to see me and he said, "The Public Works Division in the AID headquarters here in Washington wants to remove me from the division because I don't have an engineering degree. They all have engineering degrees and therefore think that somebody should have that academic degree in order to be the head of this division." I said, "Well, this is all news to me. I'll have to look into it." Fortunately, my predecessor as director of the AID mission was in Washington at that time. I talked to him and he told me that this fellow, despite his lack of a degree, was one of the most efficient operators that he had ever encountered in AID in the way he ran this division. He spoke very highly of him. So I took his word for it and got a hold of his fellow again and said, "Look. I want to keep you in view of what I've heard," and I told the Public Works Division of AID headquarters to back off. They did. I would say it proved to be one of the best decisions I ever made and this was made before I even got to Laos.

LC: Where was Tom from? Do you know?

JM: I think his address was Hawaii.

LC: Why not?

JM: Home address. Anyway, he had built up a construction capability within that AID mission, which even the biggest AID mission we had in Vietnam did not have that capability in its Public Works Division. What the Public Works Division usually, in an

AID mission was to develop projects, recommend them to Washington, submit them to this long review process in Washington. Once it got the approval in Washington then they had to be put out to bid to civilian contractors.

LC: Yes.

JM: You can see how long that would take. In fact, it always cost a lot more. Tom Cole had built up within this division, with the aid of Thai and Filipino engineers whom we could hire at relatively low salaries, and with quite a number of Lao personnel, the capability to construct projects himself. As a matter of fact, that was the primary purpose. The training of the Lao Ministry of Public Works, as I indicated, fell to the Bureau of Public Roads division of the AID mission, and not to our Public Works Division, which was really a construction division. I'll give you an example, Laura.

LC: Okay.

JM: In 1966 when we had the great flood of the Mekong River all through Laos, the only airport in northwestern Laos, at Ban Houei Sai, was swept away by the flood. That airport was important for both military and civilian reasons, since it was the only means of access to that area. So as soon as this happened the ambassador, Bill Sullivan, turned to me and said, "Can you build a new airport up there?" So I got a hold of Tom Cole and he said, "Yes. Sure, I can." In six weeks he had a new airport ready which was jet capable. The reason it could handle jets was that he reconstructed it in a manner that it ran level for about half the distance, then had a slope downhill and then continued level for the rest of the distance. So when airplanes took off they took off faster and when they landed they were slowed down by this slope in the middle of the runway.

LC: That's quite ingenious.

JM: Now, it was not paved. We didn't go in for 20th century activities in Laos. As I think I've indicated we were trying to bring Laos into the 19th century. So it was compacted laterite actually. But in six weeks that airport was ready. Now you can imagine if we had gone through the normal U.S. government and AID process it would have taken years to have gotten us an airport there again. This is just an example of the kind of thing I could do. All I had to do was pick up the telephone, say, "Tom, I want you to do this and I want you to do that." Now I'll give you another example of what he was capable of doing. I think I have indicated that there were no roads whatsoever

into northeastern Laos, which was the most active military area in the country where the local tribes people, the Meo as we called them, now called the Hmong among the refugees here in the States, H-M-O-N-G. We always called them Meo even though the word "meo" meant slave, but they never seemed to resent it at all when we were there. They were always referred to in the 1960s as Meo. Anyway, they were the fighters in the so-called CIA secret army up in northeastern Laos fighting the Vietnamese communists and their Lao lackeys, if I can put it that way. So everything had to be flown into that area. Finally I said, "Well, could we not build a road at least to the two principal small towns or villages there?" One was where the CIA operated and the other was where the AID mission operated. They were about, oh, I guess, eight or ten miles apart. I said, "Build a road at least from the area which was controlled by the Lao government up into that area." So the ambassador, Bill Sullivan, said, "Well, if we build a road into that area to get in by surface that means the communists can also get out by surface. So that's a political question." Excuse me, Laura. "We need to get the prime minister's approval for this, Souvanna Phouma." So he said, "You go see Souvanna Phouma to get the approval." Normally, Bill Sullivan as ambassador dealt with Souvanna Phouma. I think this was the only issue in my three years there in which I went to Souvanna Phouma myself. He was a little skeptical at first and finally I succeeded in talking him into it because I thought it would save the U.S. government a very substantial amount of money if we could at least get personnel and supplies into these two principal villages up there in the northeast by surface and then move them around within the area by airplanes or helicopter. He finally agreed to it.

LC: Uh-huh. Joe, was the item that convinced him the savings on the American side or how did you couch that?

JM: Well, I told him if we can save money now spent on air transport, if we can save that money we can use it for a more useful purpose for the development of Laos.

LC: Got it.

JM: I had some flexibility that I could do that, which is also unusual in an AID mission.

LC: Indeed.

JM: But that was the key factor, I think, which convinced him. Just cut down

on air cost, which is an ephemeral cost, and put it into development. So that managed to convince him from that basis.

LC: Very good.

JM: So I turned to Tom Cole and I said, "Why don't you see what you can do with this project?" It was impossible because of the mountains and the jungle to survey the route from the surface. So what Tom did was to survey it from airplanes and helicopters, realizing that what he could see from there would not necessarily be the final route. As the road was gradually developed the route might have to be changed in places. So he got started during the last year I was in Laos. The road was by no means finished when I left Laos a year later, but Bill Sullivan, when I saw him later—he stayed on longer than I did—told me that the road had been finished and served the purpose which I had envisioned for it. This was by far the biggest project that Tom Cole had ever undertaken. This was, oh, I don't remember how many miles, but it must have been, I would guess, fifty miles anyway or something like that.

LC: His crew included the Thai and Filipino engineers that you talked about.

JM: Yeah. That's right, and then lots of Lao employees because there were no engineers in Laos to employ of Lao extraction. So we had to use these engineers.

LC: What about equipment and so forth?

JM: Well, we had secured through the AID program all the equipment necessary for Tom to engage in this construction. He had this in his equipment park because he did a number of other road projects in Laos, also built schools, any number of things.

LC: Wow. Very impressive.

JM: This was an extremely useful division and as I've indicated, unique as far as the USAID agency was concerned because I could approve a program myself without going to Washington and get it executed in the time in which AID Washington considered it, let alone putting it out for civilian bid.

LC: For sure. Yes. Yes.

JM: I paused to describe this division because it was both a unique one and an extremely effective one and very, very useful. The first decision, as I said, I ever made with respect to Laos was to keep that guy on in charge and he was superb. Oh, I'll say something else, Laura, about this fellow. One way in which he managed to carry out

these projects very effectively and quickly was that he had developed his own wage structure. He had the flexibility so he could reward those who were on his payroll who were really effective by increasing their wages without necessarily raising the general wage level and without going through a long bureaucratic process. I had, as I've indicated, two thousand Lao employees on the payroll. I found—that's a rough figure—I kept trying to find out after I arrived exactly how many were on the payroll and the head of our administrative division never really gave me an answer. After two years I happened to be in Washington on consultation and I was talking to Bill Hall, who was another Foreign Service officer like myself on loan to AID, but he headed the Administrative Bureau of AID, the one that handled personnel worldwide. I was in Washington and went to see him and he said, "You got any problems?" I described this one. I said, "For two years I've been trying to find out how many employees we actually have on the AID payroll. I can never get a precise answer out of the head of the administrative division." He said, "You want me to remove him?" I said, "Yes." This was the most surprised guy in the world because he thought he was thoroughly ensconced in Laos. He had ingratiated himself [with] the local employees in a manner that I felt was not quite proper. He was extremely surprised and upset when he found out shortly after I returned from consultation in Washington that he was to be removed from Laos. The AID headquarters in Washington sent me a very good successor who had been head of the administrative division of the AID mission in Pakistan. It wasn't too long before I got precise figures out of him as to just how many people we had on the payroll in Laos. But since this fellow was extremely effective his next approach was to say that Tom Cole's unstructured personnel operation in his division needs to be regulated in accordance with the regulations governing the rest of the Lao employees. So then I had a big conflict between these two. I didn't want to upset Tom Cole's effective operation, but I also was very grateful to this guy for having brought order into the general employee situation as far as the AID mission was concerned. I think I spent much of the last year trying to referee between these two division heads without ever making any firm decision, but trying to assuage both of them. That's a difficult task, Laura, when you have two effective heads of division, each of which has a legitimate approach. You don't want to upset either one of them because they're both good. But I

managed to work that along in some manner for the rest of the time I was in Laos.

LC: That's a very difficult problem when you've got both of them doing what you want them to do, but they're doing it differently. Can you give me the name of the fellow who came from Pakistan with the experience?

JM: I'm trying to think of his name now. It won't occur to me right off the bat, Laura, but he was very good.

LC: You may think of it later anyway.

JM: Yeah, right. Of course, as I indicated we did have an administrative division naturally. We had a controller. We had an agricultural division. We had an education division, a public health division. Let's see. What else? A police division. I'm not sure I can remember all the divisions, Laura. Let's see.

LC: You're doing very well.

JM: Well I can think of others. Others will occur to me, I'm sure.

LC: Yeah. Maybe we could talk about bits and pieces from some of the ones that you've mentioned just in that list that you just gave.

JM: Yeah, as I got into the program some of these will emerge and maybe some of the other divisions will occur to me also.

LC: Very good.

JM: Laura, now having given this somewhat incomplete picture of the structure, let me indicate what I started to do as soon as I got to Laos as far as managing the AID mission was concerned.

LC: Okay.

JM: The first thing I did was to summon a meeting of all of the AID employees so they could see me and begin to get acquainted with me and lay out what my thoughts were at that initial stage with respect to the AID program. I remember stating to them that the underlying purpose of the AID program was to try to generate support from the population for the Lao government. That was the underlying political purpose. I did not mention in this public meeting that there is also another political purpose, of course, as far as the U.S. government was concerned and that is to keep the neutralist government of Laos favorable to what we wanted to do in the military sphere in Laos since at points in the past we and the neutralist government had had our very serious differences. I say

neutralist government. It was headed by the neutralist prime minister. Actually it was a government of both neutralists and conservatives at the time I was there.

LC: Yeah, a coalition.

JM: Headed by the neutralist Souvanna Phouma. So I had this, I suppose, about an hour's meeting which I gave a talk to all the employees. The next thing I did was to arrange for a program review with each of the heads of divisions of AID in order to acquaint me with the details of the program. I arrived, I think, in mid-September. This took upwards of a month to have a thorough review of each division. I think we would conduct no more than one per day. That gave me a very good understanding of not only an overview of the program, but the details of the operations of the various divisions. The other thing that I did, although not immediately upon arrival, was to conduct an annual review of each of the divisions' activities with the Lao ministries which handled those activities. I had to conduct all those myself because out of five hundred American employees, I think not more than half a dozen spoke French. The Lao, as I've indicated, did not speak English except for one fellow who had gone to college in the States. So I conducted all these program reviews annually with the Lao ministries and always with the minister himself, sitting down and outlining in French what our thoughts were with respect to the program to be undertaken the following year. Now, this was not generally difficult to get the concurrence of the Lao government. I will explain why I took the initiative to do this. In the Lao government there was not that much energy or capability within the various ministries of the government to develop an annual program themselves. Generally we had to do it in the AID mission, but we did not really spring surprises on them because our liaison, both by myself and by those farther down in the AID mission with their Lao counterparts, were so frequent that the programs were in a sense developed in a mutual manner, but then I would take the program proposals that we had developed and get the minister's concurrence and make sure that what we were doing fitted with his views. I never had any real problems in that respect because we had operated so closely with the Lao before. I will say this. The fact that so few AID employees spoke French, I think, was a general defect of the AID program, not only in Laos, I suspect in other countries where AID operated also, particularly in countries where there's very limited knowledge of English. You certainly cannot reach maximum

effectiveness if you can't communicate in a broad manner. I can remember, for example, take agriculture, which was one of our principal areas of activity. Agriculture fell under the ministry of economic affairs in Laos. It was not a separate agricultural ministry. The head of agriculture was a director in that ministry. He in a sense was below the level I would normally have dealt with since I dealt with the ministers and the number two in the ministries, but since our agriculture people did not speak French I developed a very close and effective relationship with this director. Whenever I saw him he and I would communicate in French all the time with the AID personnel looking on approvingly, but not fully conversant with what was going on. So that is a criticism which I think could certainly be leveled at AID at that time and probably still could be. In the regular Foreign Service we had many more people who could speak at least the language in which the people were educated, for example in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in French, even if they could not speak Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Lao. Even some of the more esoteric languages, of course, we have quite a number of Arab speakers in the regular Foreign Service, to give an example, Chinese, Japanese, and so on, Russian as well.

LC: Yes.

JM: But AID has never—well, I shouldn't say this. I'm not familiar with it today, but I'm dubious that that has improved very greatly. After all, one of the criticisms in Iraq is that the armed forces have so few Arab speakers. Americans are not generally very good at foreign languages, as you know.

LC: Yes. Yes. Well—

JM: That is a weakness, I think, that affects foreign and military policy of the United States. Of course, in a lot of countries English has become very widespread, as it did in Vietnam after I left there. When I was in Vietnam one spoke French most of the time with the Vietnamese, but when we had a half-a-million Americans in Vietnam by that time English was becoming much more widely known but that was after my period of service in Vietnam itself. We never really had American military personnel in Laos so the same thing did not—the same acquisition of English by the local people never did occur in Laos.

LC: Would virtually all of the ministry heads in the Laotian government have been conversant in French?

JM: Oh, all of them were because they had gotten their education in French. I might just mention or interpose at this point, Laura.

LC: Sure.

JM: One of the projects—again, this was one I inherited but the execution fell mainly within my tenure there—was to develop the first high school in which the language of instruction was Lao. There never had been a high school with Lao instruction before. We had a contract with the University of Hawaii to advise the Lao in detail on development of a high school in which the textbooks and the instruction were in the Lao language. That project was proceeding along very nicely at the time I departed from there. It had only really begun operation but as you see, anybody who had any education in Laos prior to that time had been educated in the French system.

LC: Where was this high school?

JM: Laura, I think the Lao who went to high school had to go to Hanoi to find *lycée* in French. I'm not sure the French had any *lycées* even in French there. They may have.

LC: Yes. I think, no I think you're right, Joe, that they did have to go to Hanoi.

JM: I remember the Lao minister with whom I became most intimately acquainted, Ngon Sananikone, who was both minister of public works and minister of economic affairs used to talk to me about his being in Hanoi for his *lycée* work.

LC: The high school that was being built and developed with the advice of the University of Hawaii specialists, where was that located? In Vientiane?

JM: In Vientiane itself, yes.

LC: Its enrollment? Do you remember?

JM: I don't remember what the figures were, Laura. Of course, it just got started while we were there. So it must have been relatively small, but I assume grew. Whether it ever expanded to include additional high schools after I left I don't know. I left in '68. The communists took over in '75. So the AID mission operated for seven years after I left there.

LC: Had AID built the building?

JM: I think we probably did, Laura. I wouldn't assert that flatly, but I think we probably did.

LC: Okay.

JM: Now, I was indicating how I would annually go to the Lao ministers themselves and discuss the programs related to their ministries and get their approval. This was useful both—these reviews both within the AID mission and with the Lao were useful in a program sense in two ways. One, we would develop the annual—well, first we would develop the budgetary proposal for Congress for the ensuing fiscal year because obviously AID had to go first to the foreign relations committees and then to the appropriations committees in Washington in order to get the appropriations for the succeeding fiscal year. So I would discuss the proposals we submitted to Washington for this congressional budgetary process. I would also discuss in detail the operating program for the year in question. In other words, we were operating two budgetary years, one the current year with the actual program being put into the execution and the other the budgetary proposals for the program for the succeeding year. So both of these I would develop to submit and discuss and ask for the approval or suggestions of the minister. Usually there was very little input on the Lao side. Now, in addition to going to each Lao ministry for this purpose, I also felt that there should be some place in the Lao government which had a more or less complete overview of our AID program. So annually I also got together jointly with the Lao ministers of finance and planning in order to outline in complete detail the overall program in all its phases to make sure they were acquainted with it and to see whether they had any suggestions or comments. All this was rather time consuming, but I think effective in both these program reviews within the AID mission and with the Lao government were very useful and effective, I think, in developing the kind of program that would fit with both government's views and also contribute to the maximum extent possible to our objectives. Now, Laura, I might go on at this point to what I gradually developed as the strategy of the AID mission for my tenure there.

LC: Very good.

JM: It really had three phases of strategy. First was that I knew that I had to continue the war-supporting programs and the humanitarian programs which had been already developed within the AID mission. For example, we always had more than a hundred thousand refugees on the AID roles. Not the same, by any means, because we

would try not only to give them the necessary daily support they needed as refugees from the war but also to get them resettled to the maximum extent possible. This was an ongoing process. So as some were moving off the AID refugee roles, other refugees generated by the military operations in Laos would come on the roles. So generally speaking, we usually had about a hundred thousand of them. Another humanitarian activity was what we did in the public health field. I might even get into that a bit at this stage. Laura, I want to first talk about the combination of war-related and health activities in northeastern Laos, which was one of our big areas of operation. That's the one I indicated in which we worked very closely with the CIA in supporting the Meo forces against the Vietnamese and Lao communists. Our biggest refugee program was obviously up in that area. In some ways it was difficult to tell where the CIA program stopped and the AID program started because CIA supported the soldiers. We, through our refugee programs, supported the families of the soldiers because many of them were refugees from areas in northeastern Laos which had fallen to communist control. So we meshed and operated very closely with CIA in the refugee operations in northeastern Laos. We also had built a small, I'll say, quote "hospital," closed quote. I put it in quotes because it was a pretty rudimentary facility. We had one American nurse who would give brief training to young Meo girls who had been characterized as nurses in this hospital. This was the only hospital of any kind in that whole area of northeastern Laos. All the soldiers who were wounded would come into this hospital and civilians would be taken care of there, also. The head of the Public Health Division in AID, a doctor and his wife was also a doctor, took it upon themselves to not only to advise with respect to this hospital, but also did a lot of operating themselves, actual operations in the hospital. There was a Lao doctor there who was I think the only—he must have been a surgeon, I think the only Lao doctor on the staff. So these two Americans from the AID Public Health Division not only had the head of the countrywide public health responsibilities, but also operated as a practicing surgeon in this hospital because they were extremely dedicated people. I admired them. Particularly the wife, however, I thought sometimes had become a little bit distorted in her view of the AID program and in public health in general because she was so devoted to what she was doing up in that area of Laos. You run into this type of person who becomes so extremely immersed

in one particular phase of the activity that others tend to get downgraded or neglected in his or her opinion.

LC: Joe, did you mention that combat casualties would also come through there?

JM: Oh, yes, because there were no other medical facilities in that area. So, all the combat facilities on the Meo side would come into that hospital.

LC: Would they arrive by helicopter?

JM: Oh, yeah, usually by helicopter, yes.

LC: Okay. Mm-hmm.

JM: Then another thing we did in that area, we established the first rudimentary educational facilities. There had never been any schools in that area before at all. So we got them started at the primary level in a number of areas. I'll mention an interesting thing, Laura, with respect to this operation, or a couple of interesting things with respect to the operation in northeastern Laos. I inherited as the AID regional representative for that area a fellow who was called Pop Buell. I don't know whether you've encountered him in your readings about Laos or not. Pop was an old, dirt Indiana farmer who was widowed, had become widowed and joined the International Voluntary Service, which was a small precursor organization of the Peace Corps type, which operated primarily in Vietnam and Laos, but to a degree in one or two or three other countries, supported financially mainly by AID. Pop had become an International Voluntary Service volunteer in Laos and was so effective. He operated in northeastern Laos and this old dirt farmer who could not really speak English and really not write it all effectively learned the Meo language. Because of his background, down to earth approach, he established very effective relations with the Meo and pretty soon shifted from the International Voluntary Service to the AID payroll and became our regional representative up in that part of Laos. Again, he was a person I inherited, but I soon became a thousand-percent supporter of him because he was so effective in his operations up there. He was a man whose judgment I found I could trust completely. We also had one American nurse, as I've indicated, and one American secretary for him. He came to me after I had been there a couple of years and said, "These two girls need some vacation. We've got to send them out of Laos so they can get some change of scenery for a while." He said, "But I don't know how I'm going to get along without them." So he

and I agreed that Nonie and our oldest daughter, Penny, who was in Laos for the summer from school, would go up for a week. Nonie would mother the Meo nurses and Penny would act as Pop's secretary. One of the things that happened was they got there and Pop gave his first memorandum to Penny to type up. Penny was appalled at the English in it. Pop realized what was happening. He said, "You change any of my English that you think needs to be adapted." He gave Penny *carte blanche* in that respect. As I said, Nonie took care of the Meo nurses for the week. This main area, this main village of civilian activity called Sam Thong, T-H-O-N-G, was only about ten or a dozen miles from the—I shouldn't call them lines, but from the area where the Vietnamese communists operated. So it was not totally secure. When Nonie and Penny would go for meals they were accompanied by a male guard with a rifle just to go from their quarters to where they were going to have their common meals with the Americans generally operating in that area.

LC: How were you with this arrangement, Joe, for that week? Were you a little nervous?

JM: Well, you know, one always feels a niggle of security concern when it's not that far a distance from the areas of communist control. I think maybe, Laura, I'll mention another example of security concern. The time that Nonie and I were in a provincial capital in south-central Laos. I had to fly back from there to Vientiane for some reason. Some emergency had arisen. Nonie, who didn't like to fly in airplanes, although she strangely enough decided she loved helicopters even though they're so much more dangerous, said she would drive back with the Lao chauffeur we had in the car, but she would stay overnight in an intervening provincial capital. I think I've mentioned this incident.

LC: You did, yes.

JM: That was the time that their radiator started leaking and they had to stop at every stream. They had glued up the radiator with chewing gum. Again they were not very far from areas of communist control. So we had our security concerns from time to time during the operations in Laos.

LC: Well, she's quite something. How did she get along with the Meo girls up there in what she was trying to do?

JM: Laura, I'll let you talk to her about that.

LC: I will. I will ask her. At some point I will ask her.

JM: Yeah. She can talk to you about that.

LC: Very good.

JM: Anyway, that gives you some view of our activities in northeastern Laos in what I call the war-supporting and humanitarian field. The second strategic objective I had, the first one being to continue these activities, which I knew was absolutely necessary that I could not change that, was to emphasize the beginning of Lao movement toward self-sustaining food production. Laos traditionally had supported itself in terms of rice production, but over the years so many Lao males had been taken into the military service that rice production had fallen substantially. So I decided that the first thing if we were going to make Laos at all economically viable—and as I think I've indicated, at that time, Laos had only about a million dollars in annual exports and was importing something like, oh, I've forgotten now fifty million. So the job was immense in that respect, but the place to start was to begin to try to increase rice production again since that was the staple of the country. So I placed a lot of strategic emphasis on trying to begin a movement toward increasing agricultural output in the country. So that was the second strategic objective. The third was to reduce administrative costs in Laos so as to devote more money to the substantive program activities, particularly in the agricultural field. There was plenty of room for reducing our administrative costs. I've already hinted at a couple, I think, in our talks. One was to cut the cost of air travel within the AID mission. I found on arrival that one-fifth of our total AID budget of fifty million dollars was going simply to moving people and things around the country by air. I thought that was an awfully distorted, one-sided use of our AID funds.

LC: I'm sorry. What was the percentage?

JM: About one-fifth of it was—it was nine million dollars out of the fifty million dollar budget was being used simply for air travel by personnel and cargo. I did succeed in the three years I was there in getting that cut in half, which I've always felt was—it didn't make me popular. We had to take some pretty draconian measures, but one was that we had an officer in the AID mission who was responsible for this air operation. I instituted this procedure that he had to personally approve every request for use of an

airplane or helicopter. That's one way in which we got the cost down. The other was by contractual renegotiation of rates with Air America and Continental Airlines, the two air companies operating under contract with us and with CIA in Laos. Then the other area for reducing administrative costs was the one I hinted at a little while ago, to find out definitely how many Lao employees we had and whether we really needed them all. You certainly couldn't decide whether you needed them if you didn't know how many.

LC: Yes.

JM: It took a couple of years to get that under control, but I finally did. So those were the general three strategic objectives which I developed during the course of the three years I was there, Laura.

LC: Joe, while we're talking on this plane, your achievement in cutting the air travel and transport costs by fifty percent, was that actually able to be funneled, those savings, into the substantive programs?

JM: Yes. The overall level was not allocated to us by AID Washington under the budgetary process and negotiations with Congress was not reduced. So we were able to add that to the program costs.

LC: So did you built up AID personnel in certain divisions?

JM: We had enough personnel, Laura. We certainly got increased commodities. For example, one of the things that we began to do was to import fertilizer to increase output in the agriculture area. Another was to try to begin the development of double-cropping of rice in Laos. A number of countries, with which I'm sure you're familiar, have very considerable double-cropping of rice, but it didn't exist in Laos. It couldn't exist unless we could find the means of getting water to the rice fields during the dry season. So we began to develop small irrigation projects. I hesitate to characterize them as dams because often they were just little concrete structures on streams in order to divert the water during the dry season to rice paddies. We also imported gasoline engines in order to pump water out of the Mekong River and develop some double-cropping along the Mekong. We tried to devise means of gradually increasing the rice output and using some of these funds which we had freed up in order to cover the cost of the equipment that we were bringing into Laos.

LC: Most of this rice development, I think as you're pointing out, would be

happening in the lowland areas.

JM: On this we worked only in the lowland areas. The Meo up in northeastern Laos did not use the lowland rice production at all. They cultivated something called hill rice, which was a very different kind of rice from what is used in the lowlands because their fields were on the mountaintops. They couldn't irrigate, of course. So it wasn't feasible to try to do this in that part of the country.

LC: So the double-cropping and the irrigation projects and so on to increase rice production to actually tried to get a greater yield per year were not immediately involving Meo personnel.

JM: No. No. But we did have one project which involved the Meo but not in the uplands, not in the highlands area. We developed a project in Sayaboury Province, which was the only Lao province west of the Mekong next to Thailand, a program of fairly substantial size in which we were trying to resettle Meo in the lowlands and get them to adopt wetlands rice production. Again, I had to resort to Tom Cole who built a somewhat larger dam than these very small self-help dams that we'd built with irrigation canals in this area in order to resettle Meo refugees in that area. I think we had some Lao who were going to resettle in that area, too. Now this project was not—the construction phase had not been completed when I left Laos. So I can't tell you how it actually turned out, but this was an attempt to see whether the Meo could be readapted to, as I've indicated, the wetlands rice production, which was a completely different kind of way of operating in the rice area from the one they had been accustomed to on the tops of mountains in northeastern Laos.

LC: Would some of this have been supported from the refugee support budget because you were trying to resettle people? These would presumably be displaced Meos who were refugees?

JM: Yes, right.

LC: Okay. Any idea what the project, at least in its pilot phases, would have involved in terms of the number of resettled folks?

JM: Oh, Laura, I would have to guess. I can't remember, but I know it was the largest resettlement project of that type that we had undertaken in Laos. As I say, in a sense it was a real experiment to see whether the Meo could be readapted to life in the

lowlands.

LC: How did it look upfront? It must have looked at least potentially feasible, but there would be cultural issues also.

JM: That's right.

LC: Not just political and agricultural issues.

JM: Right. I supposed that the many thousands of Hmong refugees—I'll say Hmong rather than Meo—that came to the States had to readapt to something which is culturally much more different than what we were trying to do in Laos. A lot of them have.

LC: I take your point. I take your point, Joe. Well, let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [37] of [57]
Date: April 21, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I'm continuing my oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-first of April 2006, I believe. Yes, it is. As usual I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking by telephone from Nevada. How are you Joe?

Joseph Mendenhall: I am fine, Laura. Thank you.

LC: I'm very glad to hear it. Joe, let's continue if you don't mind with the discussion that you opened in our last session about your strategy for the management of the AID mission in Laos.

JM: Right. As I indicated during that session, the first leg of the strategy was to continue the war-related and humanitarian activities which were already ongoing when I arrived there. I discussed particularly our extensive activities in northeastern Laos in support of the local tribal people called the Meo in the war against the Vietnamese and Lao communists in that area. I mentioned in that connection the rudimentary hospital which AID had constructed and was operating in Sam Thong, one of the two principal centers in the Meo region. This was the center for civilian activities. There was another one about, oh, eight or ten miles away which was the center of the CIA-supported military activities. We had constructed this rudimentary hospital in that area, which received military casualties as well as took care of civilian needs to the extent that we could, but it was extremely rudimentary. There was one American nurse trying to give very simple training to Meo as nurses. Since these people had had no education before, obviously the product that was turned out could not be very professional, but anyway it provided the first kind of health facility that had ever existed in that area in all of history.

LC: Joe, can I ask you a little bit about the locations? Can you give me a sense of where this would have been from, say, Luang Prabang?

JM: Well, from Vientiane, the administrative capital, as I keep referring to it as northeastern Laos, obviously it was in the northeast toward North Vietnam, way into the mountains in the northeast. As I think I indicated the last time, there were no roads. Everything had to be taken in by air. The little airport in Sam Thong was one of the

busiest in the world with takeoffs and landings every two minutes every day during daylight hours. It was downhill for takeoff and then up over a mountain and just the reverse coming in for a landing, but it was an extremely active airport.

LC: Now, Joe, would it be permissible to give the name of the other town?

JM: Yes. I think now, Long Tieng, L-O-N-G, T-I-E-N-G. The one I've been talking about is S-A-M, T-H-O-N-G, each of them two words.

LC: Did you go over to Long Tieng as well?

JM: Yes. I had been at Long Tieng. As a matter of fact that was, as I said, the center of the CIA-supported military activities and the headquarters for the Meo armed forces who were commanded by an intrepid little Meo general, Vang Pao, V-A-N-G, P-A-O, who got a lot of publicity subsequently in the States after the war was over when he came to the States as a refugee. Obviously at the time every effort was made to keep much of these activities, which were CIA-supported, from getting into the public realm and generally press correspondents and visitors, official visitors and non-official visitors to Vientiane, were not taken up to Long Tieng. If we took them we took them to Sam Thong. But I remember at the ambassador's direction I did accompany Hamilton Fish Armstrong and his wife to Long Tieng to meet General Vang Pao. You're too young and I think all of the possible listeners to this oral history are far too young to have ever heard of Hamilton Fish Armstrong, but he was a famous American foreign policy specialist in the 1920s, the 1930s, particularly before World War II and continued. He was for many, many years the principal official in the Council for Foreign Relations in New York City, which was I think an even more prestigious organization at that time than it is today.

LC: Yes.

JM: I remember, for example, when I took—I think it was when I was a freshman in college—I took European history. I remember one of the collateral reading books that was put on our list to read was called *We or They* written by Hamilton Fish Armstrong, the issue being whether the fascist [and communist] powers in the world would obtain world domination or the democratic [powers]. Obviously, it had just been published I think in 1936 when it was put on our reading list. I remember that book extremely clearly.

LC: Did you mention that to him when you saw him, Joe?

JM: Yes, I did, as a matter of fact. I took him and his wife not only to Long Tieng—because of his great prestige and his support of the Vietnam War the ambassador authorized—not only authorized, but directed that he be taken to Long Tieng, to which as I've indicated scarcely any other visitors were ever taken. I don't think that was the only occasion in which I was in Long Tieng. I remember another one when I was there for lunch with Vang Pao and being served a Meo meal at lunch including raw duck's blood, which was the one thing that I decided I couldn't stomach eating at all, which I think would be perfectly understandable to most Americans.

LC: Indeed.

JM: The other thing I do remember with respect to Hamilton Fish Armstrong and his wife, my wife and I took him and his wife to visit our AID mission projects in the province which was the eastern neighbor of Vientiane Province, called Borikhane Province. I remember we had a picnic lunch during this out in the wild, so to speak. I remember one thing I had them try was something of which I know only the Vietnamese name. It is a fruit called in Vietnamese *long an*, L-O-N-G, second word, A-N. It is a small, round fruit with a very thin shell. The inside is virtually all seed but there's a narrow bit of fruit flesh inside there which I think is delicious. Although the first impression one gets when one bites into it is of ether, which I think sounds a little bit repellent. But I love the fruit and, of course, they had never tasted it before and were fascinated with it. That is something that has stuck with me about having them sample *long an*, very exotic. As I say, I've never run into them I don't think outside Vietnam and Laos.

LC: Now was Professor Armstrong on a Southeast Asia tour?

JM: Yes, right. He was still at that time the chief official of the Council on Foreign Relations. He held that position—he must have held it for, I don't know, thirty to forty years I think or something like that.

LC: Quite incredible. Yes.

JM: I think his successor was Bill Bundy, whom you've heard me mention previously. After Bill left the government I think he became the successor to Armstrong, obviously not with the same amount of prestige and influence which Armstrong had

exerted during his long tenure in that position. Now, Laura, back to the health program, unless you want me to—

LC: Indeed. No, that's fine.

JM: In addition to the rudimentary hospital we had built in Sam Thong, AID also supported a half-a-dozen other rudimentary hospitals which the AID mission had built in various sections of Laos in order to provide some kind of hospital facility, which in those areas had never existed before. The hospitals were operated by Filipino doctors and nurses. There were scarcely any Lao who had been trained medically at all. So we had a big contract with a Filipino operation called Operation Brotherhood, which I think also operated in Vietnam under AID contract. We supported these people, not only constructed the buildings, we paid for the Filipino personnel under this contract. We furnished all the equipment and supplies. I must say these Filipino doctors and nurses—I think I visited every one of the hospitals at one stage or another—were very dedicated and very capable and useful people. I have nothing but the highest praise for the Filipinos who operated in the medical field in Laos. I mention this in particular because one of the major battles I had while I was AID mission director in Laos was with the head of Operation Brotherhood in the Philippines. I might at this stage describe that to you because it almost became a diplomatic incident.

LC: Okay.

JM: I eventually, in delving ever deeper into the AID program in Laos, found that about one-fifth of our AID contract with Operation Brotherhood, and I think the total contract was around a million dollars [per year] so this meant about two hundred thousand dollars, maybe not much money in today's terms, but in the 1960s a substantially larger figure in real terms. About two hundred thousand were going to support overhead in the Philippines. When I inquired what that overhead was the answer I got was primarily training of personnel to be sent to Laos. The trouble was the Filipino doctors and nurses who were in Laos had been there for a long time. There was scarcely any turnover in personnel. So there wasn't much training to be done. So that didn't strike me as being a very satisfactory explanation as to why we should be paying two hundred thousand dollars to overhead. So I moved to reduce that sum very substantially just to allow for some salary for administrative support at the headquarters.

That stirred up a storm. First the very sanctimonious Filipino head of the organization in the Philippines tried to soft-soap me into maintaining the two hundred thousand. When he saw that didn't work then he tried to threaten me. He was close to the Filipino president and his eventual threat was to call his friend the president into the fray. Sooner or later the Filipino president sent his personal representative to Laos to look into it. Then he made an appointment to come see me. I thought I was going to be subject to a lot of pressure. It turned out it was an extremely friendly visit. No problems with the president's representative whatsoever. I'd already succeeded in getting the backing of Souvanna Phouma, the Lao prime minister, for the stand I was taking on the grounds that by cutting back on the AID overhead contribution to the Philippines there would be more money left to spend in Laos.

LC: Sure.

JM: That's a good way of doing it.

LC: Yes. It is.

JM: It was a good thing I did because the Filipino president's representative also called on Souvanna Phouma, I guess to try to see if he could generate high-level Lao support against me, which failed. Also, I got a lot of flak from the U.S. embassy and particularly from the AID mission in the Philippines that we were destroying Filipino-American relations. Hot and heavy cables were flying back and forth between Vientiane and Manila, with copies to Washington. I learned later that even in the White House in Washington—not at the presidential level, but lower level—that there was concern that the stand I was taking would alienate the Filipino government from the support it was providing to us in the war in Vietnam, support incidentally which was not very extensive at all. I didn't know that until much later, but with the embassy mission in the Philippines I finally took a position. "If you consider this payment to the Operation Brotherhood headquarters in Manila so significant from the standpoint of American-Filipino relations, why don't you just take the money out of the AID program for the Philippines?"

LC: That's exactly what occurred to me.

JM: You can imagine the storm that created.

LC: Yeah. Find another budget to bring it out of.

JM: Anyway, I stood my ground on this and eventually emerged victorious in this fight. Maybe scarred, but victorious.

LC: Jolly good.

JM: That was the Operation Brotherhood saga, which as far as I've indicated, that part of the operation which was in Laos, which was the major part, proved to be very useful and helpful indeed. Another hospital project which I inherited when I took over was the construction of one in Vang Vieng, that's V-A-N-G, V-I-E-N-G, which was, I'm going to say, roughly fifty miles north of Vientiane. Vang Vieng was the neutralist headquarters in Laos, it was the area in which the diminutive general, Kong Le, K-O-N-G, second word L-E, who had supported Souvanna Phouma when there was a three-way struggle among the neutralists, the rightists, and the communists for domination in 1961 and '62. Gen. Kong Le had his headquarters in Vang Vieng. I think this project had been proposed and approved from the U.S. standpoint for political purposes during the period when we were not sure whether the neutralists, who at one point sided with the communists and had subsequently shifted to support of the rightists, whether they would stay on the rightist side. I suspect this was considered a political sop. Anyway, I inherited this project. It was completed during the earlier part of my tenure in Laos. When it was completed then we found, not surprisingly, that the Lao had neither the personnel nor the funds to operate the hospital. So what I finally decided upon was to expand the Filipino Operation Brotherhood contract to include staffing this hospital. We provided the equipment and supplies as we were doing for the other Operation Brotherhood hospitals. I made a number of visits to Vang Vieng and became rather well acquainted with the tiny general, Kong Le. I think he was under five feet tall. That's the reason I refer to him as tiny. But at one period in Lao history, as I've indicated, he played a rather influential role. He was a captain and I think he jumped at some point from captain to general. That's the way things went in Laos at times, as you can see.

LC: What kind of impression did you form of him and under what circumstances did you see him, Joe, when you were visiting the site?

JM: In friendly circumstances. Usually when I went to Vang Vieng, as I say I indicated I was there a number of times, I would attempt to see him because he had been

such an influential individual and was still considered Souvanna Phouma's main supporter among the armed forces. My impression of him as a military man I can't say was particularly impressive, Laura, at all. I do want to tell you one time when we were there I was there with Nonie and with one of the Lao ministers, Ngon Sananikone, whom you've already heard me mention and I will talk about a great deal. He eventually proved to be the closest Lao friend that Nonie and I had among the Lao. I remember this particular time he was with us in Vang Vieng. We stayed overnight and Gen. Kong Le was having what the Lao call a *boun*, B-O-U-N. The Lao love to have fun in life. They have a *boun* or we would call it a festival, I guess, as frequently as they can think of reason for it. He was having a *boun* that night, which included a dance and a fair amount of drinking. I remember he arrived. He invited us to join the *boun*, little Gen. Kong Le. When we arrived we noticed that every guest was being frisked by some of Kong Le's soldiers for grenades because evidently at *bouns* and at other times grenades were also thrown for personal reasons or because somebody got a little too much to drink. So everybody was being searched. When they arrived at Nonie they started searching her, too, patting her down and somewhat the way that the security people do here, but probably with less regard for—what shall I say—

LC: Modesty?

JM: Modesty is the word I want. All of a sudden Gen. Kong Le noticed the soldier and he stopped him immediately from patting Nonie down. I remember we stayed quite late at this festival. I think that's the one where we first learned a Lao dance called the—what is it? The word, I can't think of the word for this particular dance. Anyway, it was a dance which the Lao always performed at their functions of this sort. There was a variation called whatever the Lao was Saravane. Now Saravane was a provincial capital in the south. That one was a bit more active than the more sedate basic dance. I think that's the one where we learned the Saravane part of it. So you can see we had some fun, too, at times, when we were traveling in Laos and some incidents that we recall with interest and pleasure.

LC: Now, would everyone get up and sort of put on their moves at the same time?

JM: Oh, yeah. A lot joined in. The problem was that there were not as many females as there were males. So that restricted the number who engaged in the activities.

There were Lao ladies there.

LC: Did Nonie go ahead and chip in?

JM: Oh, yes. All of us danced. There was insistence by the Lao that we always joined in. Oh, I know what the Lao word is for the dance, Lam Vong, L-A-M, second word, V-O-N-G. We did the Lam Vong very often in Laos.

LC: How wonderful.

JM: Whenever there was a big Lao function the Lam Vong was always performed. The Lam Vang Saravane less so, but I found it more active and interesting than the basic dance. I was still young enough to enjoy it in my forties at that time.

LC: Well, it sounds like Nonie did, too.

JM: Oh, she did. She loved it. We have pictures of her dancing with our Lao minister friend, Ngon Sananikone. I know we have a picture in our album taken at that dance I think of Nonie dancing in Vang Vieng.

LC: How wonderful. That's fabulous. She's such a trooper.

JM: Well, I think Nonie looks back on our three years in Laos as the highlight of her aspect of the diplomatic career, as a matter of fact.

LC: That's very interesting. Yeah.

JM: Now, Laura, there was one other aspect of the health program that I'd like to mention.

LC: Indeed.

JM: We not only operated in cities and towns in Laos with these hospitals that we built, but we also built very simple primitive dispensaries in many of the Lao villages who were manned by Lao technicians we trained, but you can imagine their level of professionalism was virtually non-existent. But again, this was the first time in history that these villagers, where these dispensaries were built, had ever had any resource to health facilities whatsoever. So it represented an advance for them. I decided at one point that since we were paying the salaries of these people, we were providing all of the supplies, the building and the equipment were pretty rudimentary but there were supplies, of course, involved. I decided that since sooner or later the Lao government ought to begin to take over some of these activities that we were funding so that it wouldn't be on the U.S. dole forever. I decided that even these simple health

improvement activities there should be a minimum charge, a very minimal charge because there wasn't much money in the villages for each time that a villager got a pill. I can't say, however, that I ever got very far with this proposal. As rudimentary as it was I didn't even get much support from our own Public Health Division. That never really got off the ground. I suppose that even if the villages had started to pay a lot of the money would have stayed in the pockets of the technicians who had to collect the money rather than send it on to central points for support of the purchase of supplies. This didn't really work very well.

LC: But your sense, Joe, was, if I'm reading you correctly, is to not make this seem like a handout.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Not to therefore cultivate a kind of culture of dependence with what we think about now.

JM: Yes. Because I said sometime in the future I thought the Lao government should begin to pick up the support of these activities. Since it had very limited tax base charging a very, very modest fee for a service was one way that seemed to me to make some contribution to the financial needs to support these programs.

LC: Right. Right. But as you point out there was also on the cultural side a sense of the kind of construct that would make it unlikely that monies handed over at a rural dispensary would make it into any kind of central funding.

JM: Yeah, right. I'm afraid it never would have worked very well. I think it was a good try on my part, but I can't say there was any real success in that field, unfortunately, but that's the way the cookie crumbles.

LC: Exactly. How would the decision be made as to the placement of these? Did you have a staff that was doing that kind of work?

JM: We operated a lot in rural areas, both with AID personnel and I've mentioned in our previous session the International Voluntary Service personnel. They operated rural development programs, not only with respect to health, but education, agriculture, and so on. This was part of the activities. These were generally young people, a number of whom learned Lao, as a matter of fact. I have the highest praise for them as well as the Filipinos I talked about. We visited them very often and tried to

support their activities. I think I indicated the last time that I eventually got rid of the top of the rural development program in the AID mission because he didn't seem to be supervising a rapid response to the requests from these young people in the countryside for support of one kind or another. To me this was an extremely useful program. Again, I can't say that I initiated it. I inherited this, but I certainly thought it was a very good program, one designed to support the basic political purpose, which I'd mentioned last time, which was to enhance the political support of the villagers for the Lao government.

LC: Joe, let me ask about the funding for IVS personnel, just to clarify. Would that be coming through another segment of the AID budget or was it money that flowed elsewhere?

JM: No. No. It came from the AID budget very definitely.

LC: Okay.

JM: Another thing, Laura, that I remember that we had to do in support of these rural activities, we finally found we had to have a warehouse in Vientiane for the medicines that were coming in and the equipment. So AID, there wasn't even that sort of facility maintained by the Lao government. We built this warehouse. I remember we had, at the insistence of the Lao minister of health, a big ceremony on the opening of the warehouse. Here in America I don't think we would ever consider opening a warehouse as grounds for an inter-governmental Lao-American ceremony, but this particular minister of health was a very pompous self-important individual who I don't think ever accomplished anything of substance in his field, but was always eager to push himself forward whenever an occasion arose in which he could do so. I never particularly liked him. As a matter of fact, I had one personal problem with him, which I'll mention at this stage, which further soured me on him. I got a call from him one day saying he wanted to come and see me, which was unusual because usually when the Lao minister wanted to see me as director of the AID mission I would go to his office as one does in diplomatic practice.

LC: Yes.

JM: He indicated he wanted to come see me. I said fine and made an appointment. I think it was for a Saturday. At the time I told my secretary about it to

see that he was brought in as soon as he came. The time arrived for his appointment and time passed and no minister. I began to wonder what happened. Finally I went out and she said she had heard nothing from him. Outside her office there was an American Marine guard. I went out to see him to see whether the minister had ever shown up. He said, "Oh, yes. He came here, said that he had an appointment to see you and then just stood around." Then I realized what had happened. Whenever I went to call on him I saw an outer office functionary, not his immediate assistant. The outer office functionary would take the word to the inner office assistant who would then take it on to the minister that I was there. I hadn't thought that the minister would stop at the Marine guard and not even come on in to the secretary, which any American would have done. Once past the guard they would have gone into the secretary, but he never did. When he hadn't shown up I was concerned because knowing the kind of person he was I thought he'd make a big stink about it. I telephoned him, the minister, to see what had happened. He was quite huffy telling me what had happened that he had appeared, but he had not been announced to me. Well, I finally assuaged him. It turned out what he wanted was to put one of the houses he owned up for rent by AID for some of its personnel. So it was very much a private matter. Fortunately, not long thereafter, he decided to resign as minister and pose as a candidate for the National Assembly in a special election in the district. He was opposed by a member of the Sananikone family—I've mentioned our friend Ngon Sananikone, and the latter who I guess had greater supply. I know the latter won the election and this guy was completely out. So I remember the name of this minister, too, Tay Keoluongkhot. He was then out of the government. He, incidentally, was a neutralist. He was not a rightist.

LC: Can you spell that just to help us out?

JM: Yeah, the first word is T-A-Y. Let's see. Keoluongkhot I think K-E-O-L-U-O-N-G-K-H-O-T, I think. Lao names, like Thai surnames, are particularly long as you can see.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JM: I think I mentioned this incident when we were talking about Vietnam, which occurred in Saigon when the Thai ambassador's wife said to—she had received a lot of complaints about the length and difficulty of Thai names. She came back and said,

"But you have some very funny names, too. Here in your mission you have Mr. Cunningham and then Mr. Trueheart who succeeded him," which I thought was—I've mentioned this to you before, Laura. I'm sure you remember it. But anyway, Thai and Lao names are long and sometimes difficult to remember.

LC: But after the election he kind of disappeared?

JM: That's right. He kind of disappeared from the political scene to my pleasure.

LC: Yes. No regrets.

JM: Yeah, right. Right. Now, Laura, that's I think so much for health. I want to mention one other activity of the AID mission in connection with its humanitarian support activities. This was probably in some ways the biggest of all. You've heard me say that in 1966 we had the great flood of the Mekong in Laos. It struck Vientiane particularly hard. The whole city, almost all the city—fortunately our residence was high enough that we were not affected, but most of the city, including the ambassador's residence, was under about a yard or meter of water for two weeks. So you can see how this would have affected the operations of the Lao government and economy. As a matter of fact, everything just came to a halt as far as the Lao were concerned because of this flood, including the availability and sale of rice, the basic food. So soon after this started, we got word that the Lao wanted us to provide rice from the stocks we had for refugee support activities to the population of Vientiane. I said, "Okay. We'll provide it, but I see no reason why we should do it on a grant basis since the inhabitants of Vientiane are not impecunious. They have Lao currency, the kip," K-I-P. So I said, "What we'll do then is provide several points around the city at which we shall sell rice to the population." Had I mentioned this before to you, Laura?

LC: No. No. No.

JM: No? Anyway, for most of two weeks, I guess, we provided these sales points with our rice around the city. Since there was no bigger Lao bank note than the equivalent of two dollars it meant that since so much rice was being sold at all these points at the end of each day our people—I used Americans and Lao from the AID mission to man these points—at the end of the day each of them had many burlap bags full of Lao banknotes.

LC: Full of the currency.

JM: Full of the currency, which they would bring back to the mission. At the end of the flood, the Lao government turned to us as it usually did when there was any need for funding and said, "Look. Our streets in Vientiane have disappeared under the impact of the flood because of the waters and the use of the heavy trucks which were high enough above the water they could get through. Nothing is left of our paved streets. We want you to repave our streets." So since we had collected $19,000 or $20,000 from the sale of rice in the city I said, "Okay. We'll repave your streets. I'll use this"—I telephoned Tom Cole, the head of the Public Works Division whom I described the last time. I said, "Tom, we need to repave the streets of Vientiane." He said, "Okay. I'll get to it." He used the $19,000 or $20,000 for the materials that were necessary to repave the streets. So without any recourse to Washington, any additional funds, we put the streets in better shape than they were before the flood took place, but we were able to do it very quickly and economically simply because we had this money. We had this construction facility in the AID mission.

LC: Yeah. That was nicely finessed, Joe, very nicely finessed. How was the rice brought into Vientiane and where was it stored?

JM: I think we had warehouses at the Vientiane airport among other places, but when the flood waters began to rise our personnel stored that rice in such a way that it was above the level of the water. So it was not spoiled.

LC: Very good.

JM: So we continued to have our rice availability fortunately. The other things that were done during the flood, we brought in American military water purification facilities so that the population in Vientiane could get clean water. We operated those for the two weeks. We also inaugurated a program of inoculations to prevent diseases from spreading. I think our people inoculated about eighty thousand people, which was about the total population of Vientiane, during this process. We also operated boats and these heavy trucks to ferry the people of Vientiane around since with water that high they had trouble circulating. So we even provided a transportation service within the city. So in effect, we were running the Lao government in the city for those two weeks. Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, at one stage telephoned me and said, "I want Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister, to see all the things that we are doing in support of the

population suffering from the flood." So what we did is we got one of these big trucks. The prime minister, the ambassador and myself got in the back of one of these trucks and we toured all over the city showing what the AID mission was doing so that Souvanna Phouma would be fully aware of what was going on in the way of American support during this emergency.

LC: What was the prime minister's reaction? If you think about it, this is actually a fairly difficult moment for him, a moment of vulnerability really. What was his reaction to all of the work that AID was doing?

JM: Well, he was very, very pleased and impressed with what was going on, Laura. So it was a good political move on the ambassador's part to make sure he saw this. As I've indicated before, the Lao, even at the top level, were never really fully aware unless we took special efforts, as to how extensive American support of the government in the country was.

LC: Let me just ask you about that, Joe. Would that in part be due to just the lack of communications around the country?

JM: Partly, Laura, and partly the fact that the Lao, even at the top, were not noted for energy and to inform themselves completely as to what was going on. They often had to be prodded to get things done.

LC: So there was some degree of sort of abdication would you say, that they knew AID was there and would probably take care of it?

JM: I think there probably was to a degree, just as, Laura, I'll mention I think two instances that paralleled this to a degree. In Vietnam the South Vietnamese government was, during the earlier years in the war until the great Tet Offensive in 1968, never as deeply involved and supportive of the war as it became after they saw the real danger they were in because of the Tet Offensive and particularly after the American government, under congressional and popular pressure, had to begin to reduce the number of American military personnel in the country. The South Vietnamese government became much more involved. Its military forces became much more effective after that occurred. I think in Iraq that we may be obliged to do the same thing, to begin to put some pressure on Iraq, for example to form a government, by saying, "Look, if you don't get this government formed quickly, an effective government, we're going to have to start reducing our forces in

the country." I think that could bring real pressure upon them.

LC: A galvanizing effect.

JM: Yeah. Exactly. I did read in today's paper that Jaffrey has decided to withdraw his candidacy as the prime minister. We'll see what happens.

LC: Cause of course that's—

JM: That's of course under big American political pressure. I don't know whether our ambassador there definitely used this threat that I've just mentioned in order to get the Iraqi to really focus on creating a government, which I think is reprehensible that it's taken them so long after the elections in December to form a government, considering the emergency conditions in the country. As you've seen, I in my diplomatic career was not averse to bringing pressure on governments.

LC: Right. There is a sense that the United States is paying a larger and larger military and political price while they dither.

JM: I think the reason for President Bush's decline in popular support is primarily because of the current situation in Iraq.

LC: Some heads have just rolled, I think, as a result of that.

JM: Right. Right.

LC: We've just seen the Cabinet reshuffle and so on and the advisory reshuffled inside the White House. Yes. Yes. You have noted before, Joe, that American support should come at some kind of price to the recipient.

JM: That's right. Otherwise the tendency is to, "Well, let the Americans do it."

LC: Yes, right. Including—

JM: Well, Laura, I think it's the same way with our domestic problems. The more our government does in the way of support of a social welfare state the less the individuals and the families do to support themselves in this country. Look where our savings rate is. Why? Because the government's undertaken Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid.

LC: So you might as well spend now because the government has got you in the rocking chair later.

JM: Right. Exactly.

LC: Joe, did you always feel that way?

JM: No, Laura. When I wasn't as experienced, as I am now in my mid-'80s, I can't say that I always did. I think I have told you that I was very much a liberal New Deal Democrat for the first some forty years of my life.

LC: Well, this is actually a very interesting question because again, this is one of the issues that the president has really hung his second term on, and that's Social Security. Do you want to talk about that for a minute because I think it's quite interesting?

JM: I think it's most unfortunate for the future of our country that Bush's effort last year, 2005, to focus attention on Social Security and to begin to do something to take care of the problems which Social Security's going to have in the future and the lack of favorable response on the part of the American populace, let alone the Democratic Party, I think is a very bad omen for our future. It indicates to me what we've just been talking about, the inclination that, "Oh, the government will take care of us one way or another." To me, the way the Democrats see this particular question is "Well, eventually we'll increase taxes in order to make sure that Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid can continue." I think we'll either increase taxes, but what I fear is we will not have enough in the way of resources to maintain our military power to sustain our superpower position. You saw the paper I recently wrote on that.

LC: Indeed. Indeed. The domestic side of that, the entitlement programs, as I guess we're calling them now, hugely consume the budgets.

JM: Yeah. They're going to consume much more in the future unless we do something about them at the present.

LC: Well, there will be, of course, fewer payers in and more collectors. This is of course what President Bush I think was trying to point out at least as something that ought to be dealt with, if not all in one go then at least over a phased program of trying to reduce the—

JM: What I would like to see, Laura, is some kind of compulsory savings plan, but I can't see any real political hope for its adoption.

LC: Have I asked you about whether you would be in favor of a compulsory service requirement for young people?

JM: Well, that one I'm not so sure, Laura, but compulsory savings absolutely.

LC: Okay.

JM: Compulsory service has something to be said for it.

LC: Not necessarily military service, but some kind of—

JM: I know, but I'm never too sure that government-operated programs of that sort that you were just mentioning are really very effective in terms of results produced. They may increase discipline as far as the individual is concerned, but the concrete results achieved, I have extreme doubts as to whether they're very useful. I, for example, have a real question mark with respect to the real contribution which the Peace Corps makes in this world. I know it's probably sacrilege to being to look at the question as, but if it were operated in the way I tried to do in Laos, to integrate the Peace Corps personnel as I tried to integrate the International Voluntary Service personnel into our program activities, then I think it could serve a useful purpose, but the so-called people-to-people approach doesn't warm me very much.

LC: Because it's sort of a one-off with no continuing results and no fabric within which it's being organized?

JM: That's right. Right.

LC: What did you think about the Peace Corps back in the day when it was much more popular a program?

JM: Same feeling, Laura. Same feeling.

LC: Really?

JM: Yes.

LC: Okay, that's interesting. IVS was different because, as I just asked you and you confirmed, this was really funded as part of AID and then those folks could be deployed within—

JM: Laura, that I think also depended very much upon mission directors. I'm not sure that the IVS operated in that way in—it didn't operate in many countries, but I'm sure it operated that way even in Laos before I insisted on integration to the maximum extent possible into our program. I can't say that I was successful in getting every volunteer integrated into the program because there were a lot of IVS personnel as well as Peace Corps personnel elsewhere who wanted to do, quote "their own thing," closed quote, when they're in one of these positions. They may disagree, for example,

with the government and its objectives in the country. I had some problem in that respect with IVS in Laos just as the U.S. mission in Vietnam did. Some of the volunteers would go to the press with their objections to what was being done. I remember I even had IVS personnel in Laos trying to portray to the press that I was living in too luxurious a style as mission director in Laos.

LC: You had become some kind of sultan or something?

JM: That's right.

LC: I can't imagine that.

JM: Sometimes you can't win, Laura.

LC: Well, I know that's really true and running a program as big as this that would be true. Would American press personnel come through Vientiane and have an opportunity to speak to IVS people or would they actually be able to—

JM: Oh, yes. They did. Sometimes the IVS personnel would seek out correspondents who were in the country.

LC: I see. I see.

JM: But I remember we had problems particularly with one IVS character. He was a constant thorn in our side. The bulk of the IVS personnel had no such problems and the bulk of them I think fitted into our program very nicely.

LC: Joe, may I ask you about the communications that you had with directors of other AID missions? Did you have a separate, if you will, communications network either in briefing papers or in reporting of some kind? Can you describe how you would stay in touch with developments at other AID missions or was it all through Washington?

JM: I think your question is, was there interchange of information about program activities and their effectiveness?

LC: Indeed.

JM: Is probably what you're really driving at, isn't it?

LC: Yes, it is. Yes.

JM: Laura, I can't say that it was really that much. I knew, of course, in considerable detail about the AID program in Vietnam because of my service there, but I can't say that there was a great deal of intercommunication in this sense between or among AID missions in various countries. No, I can't say. Maybe there should have

been more of that kind of thing.

LC: Who was the AID administrator in Vietnam during at least the first part of your stint in Laos?

JM: Well, it was my predecessor in Laos. I can't think of his name at the moment. He left Laos because he was named director of the AID mission in Vietnam.

LC: Which was the only one bigger?

JM: That's right. But he and Henry Cabot Lodge did not get along very well and he was—oh, I don't know how long he was there, but he was replaced and then went to the Congo. Then as I think I've indicated he eventually succeeded me as the AID mission director in Laos. He was both my predecessor and my successor.

LC: Sort of musical chairs.

JM: Yeah. Then when he left Vietnam he was succeeded by Don McDonald. McDonald was still the AID mission director in Vietnam after my three years service in Laos ended and I went back to Washington for a year-and-a-half, first as the deputy and then as the assistant administrator for the Vietnam bureau, in other words the head of the Vietnam bureau because Lyndon Johnson had decided upon the elevation of Vietnam in AID to bureau status rather than a lower level status. All other bureaus in AID consisted of entire continents, but Vietnam became a bureau in itself—I'll go into this much later—

LC: Very good.

JM: With over four hundred people in the bureau in Washington. This happened in 1967 and then went I went back to Washington in mid-'68 as I indicated I became first the deputy for six months and then for a year the head of that bureau. McDonald was the AID mission director in Vietnam not for the entire year I was head of it. He had served in Vietnam then, I think, by three or four years. He was succeeded by another fellow whom I knew well, but whose name I can't think of either. McDonald and I never got along too well personally.

LC: What was that based on? Do you remember?

JM: Well, I think one problem was that as my service went on in Laos I became favorably known to a number of congressmen as a pretty tough guy in administering the program in Laos. These congressman on their visits and senators would go from Laos to

Vietnam and then be critical of McDonald for not following the same kind of relatively tough approach in administering the program in Vietnam. So I think this was one of the reasons for it.

LC: So he suffered by comparison.

JM: I can say there may have been some resentment by McDonald by the fact that I was not a career AID employee, but instead a regular Foreign Service officer.

LC: He was career AID.

JM: Yes, very much so. He came back to Washington as the assistant administrator for, I think, all of the Middle East and South Asia. So he was the same level in Washington that I was as assistant administrator for Vietnam.

LC: Well, Joe, go on ahead if you would and describe the resolution of events in Vientiane as the waters receded and so on.

JM: I do want to mention one other thing, Laura, in connection with the flood. Again this is personal. Nonie was asked by one of the Lao ladies, the wife of Oudone Sananikone. I've mentioned the Sananikone family. He was a member of it although I think he was a cousin of Ngon Sananikone and not more closely related. Anyway, his wife was probably the most active Lao lady in the field of charitable and good works organizations. During the flood she called Nonie and asked Nonie whether she would accompany her to visit certain of the villages south of Vientiane along the Mekong which were also flooded and bring some help to them. Nonie agreed to go with her. She arrived and they got into a boat with one man and I think something like ten or a dozen old Lao ladies. They got on the Mekong, which as I've indicated was in full flood stage. Well, after they got beyond Vientiane when they were near these villages the motor conked out on this boat and it was being swept by these swift waters down river. Finally the one guy on it succeeded in maneuvering it close enough to shore where he could grab hold of some bushes. There were no life belts, of course. None of these old ladies could swim, but Nonie could have been swept away completely by the flood of the Mekong if this guy hadn't succeeded in maneuvering the boat to get close enough to land that they could get off it. This was another experience she had.

LC: Well, she definitely did her part.

JM: She did.

LC: There's no question about it.

JM: I think if she had consulted me before she went on it I would have advised, "Don't get on the Mekong when the waters are so swift. You don't know what will happen."

LC: But she was invited and felt that she ought to go?

JM: She felt that she should, yes.

LC: Yes. Where were you, Joe? Were you in Vientiane trying to manage everything?

JM: I was working in the mission. I knew nothing about all this until Nonie told me later. I don't think she even consulted me and told me she was going.

LC: How did they get back up to Vientiane, do you remember?

JM: You'll have to ask Nonie.

LC: I will. In my interview with Nonie I will absolutely ask her.

JM: I don't know how they got back

LC: Goodness.

JM: All I know is they did. Nonie's still here.

LC: Thank goodness.

JM: Right.

LC: Well, let's take a break, Joe.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [38] of [57]
Date: May 5, 2006

Laura Calkins: Today is the fifth of May 2006 and this is Laura Calkins. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking from Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, you and I were just a moment ago talking about the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. I think you had an observation that you wanted to offer and my suggestion.

JM: Yes. Laura, we were talking about the usefulness of the FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service) monitoring, FBIS being the acronym for what you just mentioned as the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

LC: Correct.

JM: FBIS monitoring of open broadcasts from Hanoi. I certainly recall how useful it was to me in my work in Saigon in following developments and major decisions by the Lao Dong Party, the communist party of North Vietnam. I also recall in the last half of 1961 when the Kennedy administration from the president on down was interested in putting out justification for what it was doing to counter the communist North Vietnamese in South Vietnam decided that it wanted to issue a blue book to support its policy initiatives. Certainly it used, as I recall, a very considerable amount of material from the FBIS on decisions from, I think about May 1959 on, with respect to the situation in South Vietnam, showing clearly that it was the Lao Dong Party, the communist party in North Vietnam, that was really calling the major shots as to what took place in South Vietnam, despite the fact that publicly Hanoi was trying to indicate that this was a civil war in South Vietnam. It was clearly, from May 1959 on, a manifestation of the decision of the Lao Dong Party to press for the reunification of South Vietnam with North Vietnam by force if necessary.

LC: For your own work, Joe, at what point, if at all, do you remember seeing FBIS material coming across your desk?

JM: I can remember particularly in 1960 beginning to see very useful material

coming through in the FBIS reports that, as I say, I think the major decision by the communists in North Vietnam with respect to what it called the reunification of Vietnam, which was really taking over South Vietnam by force, was made in May of '59. From then on there were significant milestones in the way the policy of the communists of North Vietnam unfolded, including—let me see if I can remember specifics now. I think in December of 1960—let's see, what was it called? Anyway, it amounted to the Communist Party in South Vietnam was proclaimed as being in the vanguard of the opposition to the anti-communist Diem government in Vietnam. Then later, I'm not sure I can remember the exact date, the decision to establish a so-called provisional revolutionary government in South Vietnam that was a decision by the Hanoi communists also. The decision was picked up through the FBIS monitoring of open broadcasts by the communists in North Vietnam. So to me, all of the major policy steps that were taken as events unfolded from 1959 on with respect to the situation in South Vietnam were really revealed to us by the monitoring of the open broadcasts by Hanoi by FBIS. So I think it was an extremely useful program on the part of the U.S. government.

LC: Joe, this is probably not something that you gave a lot of thought to, but I just wonder how aware you were of the bureaucratic position of the FBIS. Were you clear that it was being administered by the CIA?

JM: I think I soon became aware. I may not have been right at the outset, but I soon became aware that it was part of the CIA.

LC: Did you know anything about where the monitoring stations were, for example, whether they were monitoring—and this again is talking about the open broadcasts, not military communications or encrypted communication but just the open broadcasts—were you aware of an effort by the CIA station in Saigon around this?

JM: Laura, I don't think so. I hesitate to give a definite answer to that, but I don't think I was aware of it. It seems to me, however, that we did have an FBIS employee in Saigon. I seem to recall that. He must have been part of the CIA station.

LC: Sure. Uh-huh.

JM: So it seems to me that I did become aware of that but I wouldn't swear to it, Laura.

LC: Okay. We're talking about the period when you were a political counselor.

JM: That's right, between '59 and '62. I can't assert flatly the date by which I first became aware of that, but it seems to me there was an employee of FBIS there as I recall.

LC: Okay. Okay. Well, thank you, Joe. That's sort of an aside but a very interesting one from the flow of our discussion, which at this point has brought us to your time as the administrator of the AID mission in Vientiane. Let's see. When we last talked you thought that perhaps this time we might discuss economic development issues, I think.

JM: That's right. In the context of the strategy which I worked out as AID mission director in Vietnam. We've already talked about the first part of my three-pronged approach to strategy, the first part being the continuation of humanitarian and war-related activities which had been initiated by the AID mission prior to my arrival. The second prong was, as you've just indicated, economic development. On this score I will address first the fields of education and health, which I consider social development rather than economic development if we want to use definitions. These two fields of activity had already been initiated by my predecessors in the AID mission. So I can't claim any credit for developing these two. I'll discuss them first. I've already dealt in part with education by pointing out, among other things, that the AID mission was developing the first high school in Laos in which instruction was to be in the Lao language. Prior to that, instruction had always been in French. The AID mission assisted in this area through a contract with the University of Hawaii, which furnished advisors to the Lao on developing this high school and also financed buildings, textbooks, supplies, almost anything connected with the development of this high school. That was an ongoing project. When I left, it had gotten underway and I think had operated for at least a year by the time I left and seemed to be proceeding as we had hoped that it would without any major problems at that stage.

LC: Joe, if I can just ask about the high school, one other additional question.

Who would have been the target audience? Who would have supplied the students? From what caste would they have come?

JM: They would have come primarily from Vientiane, which was the administrative capital, Luang Prabang being the royal capital, but they could have come from elsewhere in Laos if there were families which were interested in having their children attend this kind of a high school.

LC: Okay.

JM: I can't assert that any did and I don't think there was any, as far as I'm aware, any government aid program to these students from areas outside Vientiane. I suspect most, if not all, did come from Vientiane itself.

LC: Okay. Mm-hmm. Thank you.

JM: I suppose the idea was that if this high school proved to be successful that down the road similar high schools might be developed in other population centers in the country. Whether that stage was ever reached in subsequent years I just don't know.

LC: Understood. Okay, thanks. Go ahead, Joe.

JM: Laura, now, on other aspects of the education program, I found when I got there that USAID was financing the development of lower-level schools at the elementary level through construction around the country in population centers. These schools were built either by the public works division of USAID—I've mentioned before how we had a unique construction capability of our own—partly by that division and partly by contracts with outside contractors, rarely I think American contractors, if at all Thai contractors. [Lao] construction companies as such did not exist. Lao construction companies did not exist. So to the extent we used contractors they were—I remember some were Thai and I suspect most of them if not all of them were. Some might have been Filipino, but the USAID public works division also built some of these schools, which we funded completely, these contracts of both types, through the AID mission. Outside the major population centers, schools at the elementary level were also developed in the village and they were developed on a quite different basis. There the AID mission furnished the materials for the construction. At my insistence, ever more pressing as I become more aware of the situation in Laos, the labor was to be furnished by the villagers for this type of school. So they were not elaborate schools at

all. They were very simple, rudimentary schools, but there had never been any education at the village level before, even of an elementary type. The villagers very much wanted this. They were willing to contribute their labor. One of the reasons that I insisted that the labor was to be furnished by the villagers and not paid for by the AID mission at all was that I found over the years I was there that if the communists came in to these villages and took it over, even temporarily, the villagers would not defend a project that had been built completely and funded by the AID mission. But if they had contributed their labor they were quite willing to argue with the communists as to whether the school should be destroyed or not and put up as much of a defense against destruction of the school as they could. So there was a very practical reason from a security standpoint to insist upon villager, village labor aside from saving any money for the AID mission. This was one lesson I certainly took away from Laos that when villagers contribute their own time and effort to a project they're much more willing to try to defend it against the communists than if it's a, quote "American," closed quote, project in total. That, I thought, was a very interesting conclusion that I was able to draw from that experience.

LC: Right, and a very useful view into the sort of dynamics of the villages which were on the front line or if there was such a thing that's a sort of inept maybe description of the situation in northern Laos and southeastern Laos, too. The idea that they become in some way a partner and therefore a stakeholder, I guess, is the terminology we use now is quite interesting. Had you had this feeling before and did you apply it in other projects, Joe?

JM: Well, with respect to the village I was director of both schools and dispensaries, which I was going to get into when I discuss health, but those were the two types of things that we developed, particularly at the village level on as much of a self-help basis as possible for the reason I have just indicated.

LC: Very good.

JM: Other aspects of the education program which I inherited, we had a half-a-dozen small-scale teacher training and re-training institutes around the country in order to try to improve the quality of Thai teachers, not only in cities but the ones who were sent out to the villages. We also helped with the purchase of textbooks, supplies, even

chalk for blackboards. So we were very deeply involved as you can see in all aspects of education. Being at the elementary school level, but with the addition of one high school in the Lao language which we were beginning to develop in Vientiane.

LC: Joe, you may—

JM: Nothing—

LC: I'm sorry. Go ahead, sir.

JM: I'm just going to say, nothing at the college level. Laos had reached the—

LC: Right. You were doing the best you could to get elementary schools going it sounds like.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Joe, may I ask if there was a point person upon whom you relied for the implementation of these education programs?

JM: We had an education division in the AID mission run by an old gentleman by the name of Dr. Andrus, not always awfully effective, but a very nice old person. I think he stayed in that job during the three years I was there. We also had a number of other Americans in that division who had advised and worked with the Lao on various aspects of the education program. We also had a certain number of the International Voluntary Service volunteers, our equivalent in Laos of the Peace Corps, who worked in the education field around the country.

LC: Would they have been primarily assigned to the, for example, teacher training institutes?

JM: Among other things, yes. Absolutely.

LC: How many people, Joe, and again this is something that you may not recall off the top of your head, but do you have a sense of how many people were being trained in the institutes that were running during the period?

JM: I don't, Laura, but I suspect that most of the teachers in Laos were run through those institutes at one stage or another.

LC: Okay.

JM: Because the Lao had never succeeded in doing a great deal in the education field. The French hadn't done much while they were in control. So, almost all teachers, even at the elementary level, needed as much training and re-training as they could get.

LC: Did you have an occasion to sort of contemplate whether the French in action in this area had been a problem? In other words, the lack of French activity in creating an education system in Laos, had it served to undermine colonial control or was it really a factor?

JM: I doubt the French were motivated by that reason. The French simply gave a low priority to almost any form of development in Laos. Vietnam was their top priority in Indochina, Cambodia number two, and Laos came at the end of the scale. So I doubt that it was motivating. It was just that Laos didn't offer that much interest to the French compared particularly with Vietnam.

LC: Okay. So just as a general index of Laos—

JM: Yeah. I think I've indicated the main thing the French had done in Laos was to begin to develop a road system, including some paved roads, most of which had seriously deteriorated during the years of warfare from 1946 on. The other thing, they had constructed some government buildings and residences, which again, most of them had deteriorated rather seriously over the years of troubles in Laos.

LC: Sure. Sure. Thank you, Joe.

JM: Going on to the health field, again I've covered some of the activities in that, including the simple hospital that we constructed and operated up in the Meo area in northeastern Laos and the half-a-dozen or so rudimentary hospitals built by the AID mission and manned by Filipinos under a special contract with the Filipino organization Operation Brotherhood, and the hospital built for political purposes in Vang Vieng, the neutralist center in Laos. In addition to these activities we also opened dispensaries as well as schools at many villages throughout the country, gave very rudimentary training to Lao technicians who manned these and financed the supplies for these missions. Again, there had never been anything at all in the health field at the village level in Laos before. So as in education at the village level in health we were starting out *abinizio* in Laos.

LC: With regard to training some Laos to help with the dispensaries and clinics, where was that training conducted?

JM: I'm not sure I can remember. I think probably in Vientiane itself by our Public Health Division, but I wouldn't swear to that, Laura. That's the way I think it

was probably conducted. Again, we had a public health division in the AID mission headed by an American doctor. His wife was also a doctor on the staff. There was at least one other American doctor in that division and some other medical technicians as well who were American. So both education and health we had several American officers to supervise our rather extensive activities in these two fields. As I said, I can't claim much in the way of initiative in those fields. I did in one of our previous sessions indicate that I tried to put these very simple medical services at the village level on a very, very low paying basis. So that over the years they could be sustained by the Lao government as it increasingly took over its own responsibilities, but I didn't have any great success in that field. I did have success in imposing the labor requirement on the building of schools and dispensaries in the village. Another aspect of this, again I did not succeed very well. This was respect to roofing for both schools and dispensaries at the village level. I found that we were financing the importation of tin roofing for both of these types of construction. It was very hot in the tropics, rust grown in a climate with an extensive rainy season and also had to be paid for with foreign exchange. I learned that traditionally at the village level some kind of tile roofing had been made by the villagers themselves. I said, "Why don't we get back to that? Let the villagers do this," because of the disadvantages I've just indicated. But I can't say that I had much success in that. The villagers weren't awfully anxious to engage in the extensive work involved in the tile making kept pointing out that the tiles broke all the time. I didn't succeed very well in getting tile roofing substituted for our tin roofing around the villages in the countryside. In those three scores I succeeded in one respect. I can't say I got good marks in the other respect in terms of good outcomes.

LC: In what part of the country had the tile making gone on? Was it in the lowlands?

JM: No. I'm really talking essentially about the lowlands, about the ethnic Lao areas.

LC: Right. Okay. In the tribal areas in the mountains there was usually so much military activity, some of it actually under communist control all the time I was there. Then with warfare going on in the northeast during the three years I

was there, we did some extending of schools and dispensaries at the village level in the Meo area, northeast, but it couldn't be a widespread effort as it was in the ethnic Lao areas. The Lao tended to live in the lowlands, not in the highlands.

LC: Right.

JM: Now, Laura, proceeding from the social development programs of education and health to what I label economic development, there I would like to take credit of initiatives of my own. What I've discussed now up to this point in terms of strategy is carrying on the work that had been initiated by my predecessors. In the economic development field I said that we should begin to put some major emphasis on whatever development was really feasible in Laos in order to enable the Lao to begin to assume greater responsibility for their huge balance of payments deficit where they were importing about fifty million dollars a year and exporting about a million dollars a year. So the gap was absolutely enormous. If the country was not to remain on the U.S. dole forever we ought to begin, I felt, to make some progress toward economic development. The first priority in my view was to increase rice production, as I think I've pointed this out already. The country had once been self-sufficient in rice and I thought we ought to first of all begin to move them again towards self-sufficiency in this staple of the Lao diet if we possibly could. I think I indicated in a past session that one of the reasons rice production had declined was because so many of the younger men had been drafted into the armed forces and therefore were not able to supply their labor to rice culture in the countryside as traditionally had been the case. I think I also pointed out that women can do everything with respect to rice culture except they have difficulty plowing, controlling the water buffalo who have to do the plowing. Men are responsible for that.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: I would say that this issue of drafting, conscripting of the Lao country people, men in the countryside into the armed forces which was not, I think, the

sole reason for the fact that there had become a very considerable gap in the production of rice versus consumption. I think some of the countryside people had moved into the cities and towns for security reasons over the years of warfare. I think also that that the standard of living of the Lao had gradually risen in the towns and other population centers during these years. That meant probably a higher level of consumption of rice per capita than had traditionally been the case. Another reason, which I don't think occurred to me while I was in Laos which I'm sure was a factor was that the importation of rice at a subsidized price by the AID mission for sale on the Lao market must have been a disincentive to production by the Lao peasants themselves. This has certainly been a factor in a number of other countries where we have aid programs where I think the fact that the U.S. furnishes imports of the agriculture commodity through one device or another has all too often served as a disincentive and discouragement to local production. I suspect this may have been a factor in Laos also. At the time I don't think I ever heard anybody mention this factor, but now with my broader knowledge of aid around the world I would say this has been a not insignificant factor in the decline of production of staples in a number of countries around the world. I think the fact that so many of these least developed countries are pushing for, in the present round of global trade talks, for reduction in the agricultural subsidies by the U.S., the European Union and I suppose Japan as well, indicates or substantiates this argument that I've just been making, but I can't say I was that aware of this factor, what, thirty-five years ago in Laos.

LC: Well, that suggests that the Lao government did not bring that to your attention as an issue, that they were concerned about import substitutions.

JM: Well, I doubt that the Lao government was ever that conscious, Laura, that they would have brought it to my attention. Now, the activities in which we engaged in order to push the rice program—let me add one thing more about the fact that I tried to concentrate the mission's activities to the maximum extent possible on increasing rice production brings up another factor which I didn't really learn about until after I left Laos. As we'll see later, my next assignment after Laos was to work first as the deputy

for Jim Grant, the head of the Vietnam Bureau in the AID headquarters in Washington. Jim was a very experienced, very widely knowledgeable man about the government and AID in particular. I remember he used to stress to me that he thought that governments at any level, national level, state, lower level, what have you. The governments could never successfully carry out major objectives of more than three or four at a time. If governments tried to pursue too many objectives at the same time sufficient attention was not concentrated at the top levels of the government sufficiently on a few major objectives to really result in accomplishment. The more experience I had in this world the more I've come to believe that Jim Grant was right. Don't spread your attention span over too many major activities at whatever level government you are. If you concentrate on a few you're much more likely to accomplish something. Without having the benefit of that knowledge in Laos, as I indicated I tried to concentrate the attention of our AID mission in Laos to the maximum extent possible on this objective of increasing the outputs of rice production in Laos. So that's another philosophical point made in our discussion, Laura.

LC: Right. It's an interesting one. It has to do with the very fundamental problem of what foreign policy program will you pursue with regard to each country.

JM: Not only foreign policy, domestic policy as well, Laura.

LC: You're right. You're absolutely right, Joe.

JM: I think as one looks around the world and the U.S. one sees more and more confirmation of what I call the Jim Grant approach to public administration. For example, Bush, after he was re-elected in 2004, said he was going to put major attention on two things in particular, the future of Social Security and tax reform. Certainly in 2005 he put his major attention on social security without any real success unfortunately. Tax reform, I think, has also slipped to the back burner, again for obvious reasons. I don't think he could get that kind of a program through the Congress at the present time.

LC: Probably not.

JM: At least his heart was in the right place when he decided on these two priorities. Those two problems are still with us and are going to be with us for a long time to come and probably destined to worsen before we find any solution.

LC: Well, his domestic agenda has been pretty much run off the road by foreign

policy issues at this point.

JM: To a considerable degree I think you're right, Laura. Back to the more mundane subject of Laos.

LC: I'm not sure about that but anyway, go on.

JM: Anyway, the major aspects of our agricultural program were these. The time I was in Laos, '65 to '68, was the time of the beginning of the so-called green revolution in agriculture. Among the major successes of the green revolution was the development at an institute in the Philippines of, what I'll call revolutionary rice seeds. That is, seeds that would yield much higher than the traditional seeds had been. So having learned about this I insisted upon our introduction of these seeds, the main one of which was called IR-8. That acronym certainly got used constantly in the mission of Laos.

LC: IR-8?

JM: I-R dash 8. Right. We introduced it into Laos. It begun to be used more widely than the time my three years were up there. Let me say there is one traditional obstacle that has to be overcome with the introduction of anything that new with respect to a staple food product. We learned very quickly that the Lao peasant whose main object in life was to ensure enough food production to keep his family alive from year to year, would not adopt a new product like this, the new rice seeds, in total by any means. He would've wanted to use the old rice seeds which had traditionally fed his family until he was sure that this new-fangled device was going to operate successfully. So we couldn't convert a country from one year to another. We had to do it gradually. Which I think is quite understandable from the standpoint of the survival of the peasant himself and his family.

LC: Right. They had no evidence except presumably the word of an AID administrator that this new rice was better than what they had before.

JM: Exactly. Nobody is more conservative than a peasant in the countryside. Having been born on a farm I can assert the correctness of that belief myself.

LC: Well, how—

JM: Rural people are very conservative.

LC: How, Joe, if you can say, did AID go about what would have to be a gradual

process of introducing the new strains?

JM: Well, what we had to do Laura was to urge the farmers to if possible to expand their level of planting, their area of planting, so as to use the new seeds on some additional area. One of the ways in which we did this was to initiate double-cropping of rice in some areas of Laos. Double-cropping, which is widespread in Vietnam, had never existed in Laos partly for the very good reason that the geography in Laos in contrast to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam didn't have the same advantages in terms of supplying water to rice during the rice production, during the dry season. The Mekong Delta in Vietnam is not only crisscrossed by the major rivers, but also many, many canals connecting the rivers. So it had been possible, even traditionally in Vietnam, often to produce a second crop which had not been possible in Laos. So one of the things we tried to do was to develop an assured supply of water, not only during the dry season, but because during the wet season often the rains failed in Laos also. I've already mentioned one of the major projects in which we engaged in Sayaboury Province, which is the province in the northwest, the only province of the Laos which is on the west side of the Mekong, which our Public Works Division developed. I don't want to give the impression this was a huge project. It was still by U.S. standards a very small project, but it was a big project for Laos which we developed a dam and irrigation canals. In contrast to this project which was undertaken by this construction division of the AID mission, most of the dams that were built by AID were done under the supervision of the irrigation engineers in the Agriculture Division. They were very small dams on streams with little connecting canals from the streams out into the fields. These were really small scale, but we built quite a number of them over the countryside with as I say supervision by Americans and Thai engineers working under their supervision. Again, with the labor supplied by the villagers themselves, we would supply the supervision and the materials, but the labor had to be done by the villagers. So they were their projects.

LC: How would they be motivated, Joe? What was the process of getting them involved?

JM: Well, as I say, they recognized I think immediately the advantage of having these small dams because all too often the rains failed even during the rainy season. So they knew from traditional experience that it was important to try to have an assured

supply of water. So it was not difficult to motivate them to supply labor to these projects. The addition, of course, was to get them to try to double-crop as well. That was a new device. There they did have to be motivated, but since the other motivation existed, the damns were there. They were willing to build the small-scale dams.

LC: Joe, I'm not totally familiar with this and I wonder whether you know what previous mechanism had been used when rains had failed. What had villages done in the way of collectively or even villagers individually to put by some stocks for—

JM: Well, I think very little, Laura. Laos, of course, was the country with a very small population. So nobody ever heard of famines in Laos. I suspect that they may have existed. One certainly heard about them in India over the century.

LC: Indeed.

JM: They have now disappeared partly because of the development of the new seeds that had been widely used in India, not only with respect to rice, in the area of wheat as well.

LC: Yes, absolutely.

JM: One no longer hears of that kind of famine in India. So I suspect that what happened in many cases in Laos was villagers just didn't have enough to eat if the crop failed. This was also true in Europe in the Middle Ages and I suspect even later.

LC: Yes.

JM: This is the way the world has developed.

LC: Yes. Natural attrition.

JM: Over the eons.

LC: Yes. In some ways, yeah. Just natural attrition. Typically and traditionally the Lao lowlanders who were the rice growers had not had some kind of a storage system that I'm certainly not aware of, but I just wonder whether you had heard—

JM: Just as they did in India. Even in the period of British control, the Indians had not succeeded in solving this problem. Only with what has been called the agricultural revolution which started in the 1960s, that India and I think Pakistan, too, as well as other countries particularly in Asia had been able to eliminate this scourge of famine. In Africa we still have the problem.

LC: Indeed. How much support did you have from Washington for these ideas

which were actually new that you were trying to introduce?

JM: Washington supported us. I asked for a very substantial importation of fertilizer in 1967. I had no trouble getting it through Washington. As a matter of fact, we probably imported a bit too much. With this new program, certainly we had complete support from Washington. They were very sympathetic and understandably so I think with this idea.

LC: Well, it's very interesting. You mentioned that the institute in the Philippines where the rice was developed, the IR-8 strain. Did you have access to information about the goings on there and the—

JM: Yes. We did. Obviously that's how we learned about it. I suppose through communications from AID itself or through general reading because in the late '60s that institute and its success was beginning to get much wider. Beginning to get rather wide publicity.

LC: Do you remember whether this similar programs were being instituted in the AID missions in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand—

JM: Yes. I think so.

LC: It seems like it. Yeah.

JM: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

LC: Okay. Joe, can you tell me how successful things were with the introduction of IR-8?

JM: Well, it was beginning to spread during the last year I was in Laos. I would say that we had a very good start. How extensive it became, Laura? After I left I don't know. But at least we had a good start while I was there in something that was offered great promise fundamentally.

LC: Yeah. Very good. Let's take a break there, Joe.

JM: Okay.

JM: Certainly as an ambassador, no. Perhaps as an inspector I might have found some use for computers if I had concentrated more on them in terms of management of our embassies. I'm not sure I would have, Laura. I'm not sure whether the embassy was ever big enough to, one from a cost effective standpoint for the introduction of expensive computers. Remember at that time computers were big name frame operations which cost a lot of money.

LC: Absolutely. They had limited adaptability. You kind of had to adapt the project to the computer.

JM: Well, you didn't have personnel who knew how to use them effectively at that point since they were so new.

LC: Right. Among the five hundred employees—

JM: Laura, I'll take a pass on that question you asked. I'm too old to give a good answer for that one. (Laughs)

LC: Well, I think there are many—

JM: Excuse me. I still resist them from a personal standpoint. I know one of my sons-in-law has completely computerized, I think, all the personal income and expenses that his family makes. He thinks that it helps a great deal. He's tried to sell me on the idea and I said, "No. Thanks, but no thanks. I know my income and I know what my outgo is without a computer." Maybe it's because my operation is fairly simple, but at least in my personal activities I have not been convinced that computers would be a help.

LC: Can you say roughly, Joe, how many rice-growing peasants or the rice producers it was hoped would be brought into participation in the program?

JM: Laura, I don't think we tried to quantify that.

LC: Did you not?

JM: Statistics would have been so rudimentary in Laos I don't think there would have been any hope of producing reliable figures. All we had to do was try on an empirical basis to make sure that we were making progress in that area without setting

specific numerical objectives.

LC: Were there certain provinces that it was felt should be the target of at least the first efforts?

JM: To a degree, yes, Laura. For example, Luang Prabang, the royal capital well to the north of Vientiane was a rice-deficient area. There wasn't sufficient rice produced there in order to meet all their needs. Since the road to Vientiane to Luang Prabang, which we'll get into—we've already touched on briefly and get into to a somewhat greater extent—was still not open completely by any means. Anything that got to Luang Prabang had to be flown in except for the rainy season, the monsoon season, when the Mekong was navigable from Vientiane to Luang Prabang with very shallow draft vessels. Then commodities like rice could be shipped up the Mekong. Otherwise for the other, let's say, half of the year anything going to Luang Prabang had to be flown in because it couldn't be gotten there otherwise. One of the things we were concentrating on in connection with our rice program was to build it up, build up the production of rice and improve transportation, which I'll also get to, so that we could begin to meet the needs of Luang Prabang, this rice-deficient area, from other areas close to it. I'll get into that when we get into the road program, Laura.

LC: Sure.

JM: But what you raised is a good question because we were concentrating to a considerable degree on that particular rice-deficient area.

LC: Luang Prabang obviously has symbolic significance for the nation, but did it also have particular tactical value in the secret war that was going on?

JM: To some degree, yes, because to the north and northeast of Luang Prabang the communists did try to push out at various times. The Lao government and the CIA with its activities tried to push back. So Luang Prabang certainly did have some significance in terms of war activities in Laos.

LC: Joe, can you say anything about areas further south in Laos, for example Thakhek or even all the way down further, Champassak? Any of those areas also high on the list of lowland places that you would want to have the programmed rice-growing bolstered?

JM: Certainly the plain of Vientiane, the province, to the north and east of

Vientiane, and other areas where rice paddies existed in south-central and southern Laos, sure. We tried to concentrate on all of them in order to increase production.

LC: So basically all of those areas along the Thai border?

JM: That's right because it was in the Mekong Valley that the paddy rice was produced. So wherever it was we tried to improve production, but we did give some special emphasis to the Luang Prabang area and I think we probably did in the Vientiane plain also near the city of Vientiane because that being by far the biggest population center in Laos and it was obvious that we were going to increase rice production to the point that we could reduce imports. That would have been an important target.

LC: Okay. Well, let's take a break there, Joe.

(Editor's note: Interviewee wanted to include information that was not covered or is missing from the audio. The following is transcribed verbatim from text provided by the interviewee.)

JM: In view of the defective tapes of two oral interviews, I am high-lighting below the structure of the AID Mission to Laos:

As Director of the AID Mission, I supervised, managed and had reporting to me an extensive range of different units of that mission. While I have used the figure of sixteen divisions under my direction, it is more accurate, strictly speaking, to state that there were thirteen divisions as such, plus the Deputy Director, my invaluable staff assistant and an "Air Support" officer charged with controlling the use of the forty fixed wing aircraft and twenty helicopters under contract to the AID Mission (as wells as CIA).

Of the thirteen divisions, eight performed substantive functions of the types performed by the U.S. economic aid agency: Rural Development, Agriculture, Education, Health, Public Works, Bureau of Public Roads, Police and Training.

The Program Division developed, in conjunction with the foregoing divisions, the annual programs to be submitted to the U.S. Congress for appropriations for the ensuing year as well as the operating program to be carried out during the current year. It also monitored the actual execution of the latter program by the substantive divisions. In addition, the Program Division was charged with administering the U.S. contribution

to the Lao Foreign Exchange Stabilization Fund and the so-called Commercial Import Program, both designed to stabilize the Lao currency and control the cost of living in Laos (and described at greater length later). This division also incorporated the activities of a normal American Embassy Economic Section, which were small-scale in Laos.

Three of the divisions were of a support nature: Administrative Controller, and Office of Supply Management. The functions of the first two were, in general terms, those normally associated with their names. The last named did the ordering, storage and distribution of the myriad commodities and products handled by a mission involved in almost all the activities of the Lao Government and furnishing an array of items from heavy equipment and many thousands of tons of rice down to pencils and erasers for school rooms.

The last of the thirteen divisions—euphemistically labeled the Requirements Division—administered the American Military Aid Program to Laos. Since the Geneva Agreements of 1962 on Laos forbad the introduction of American military personnel into Laos, this division was manned by genuinely retired American military personnel. Its functions were, of course, unrelated to those of an American Economic Aid Mission.

To resume where the taping of the 38th oral interview became inaudible and at which point I was discussing our major program for increasing the production of rice:

The Lao peasant would insist, during his first year of trial with the newly developed IR-8 rice seed, on planting enough of the old seed to assure the family's needs for a year. Once he was convinced by the first year's trial that the new seed would definitely yield a better crop than his old seed, then he would be prepared to adopt the new seed.

To help foster increased output, the AID Mission imported and distributed a substantial amount of chemical fertilizer. As it had not been previously used by the peasants, it also had to be introduced gradually to its merits for raising output.

I have already referred to the AID Mission's efforts with respect to irrigation, which was (a) important because the rains all too often failed during the regular growing season, and (b) essential for beginning to encourage double cropping of rice culture during the dry season. Our agricultural engineers supervised and assisted in the erection

of innumerable small dams or weirs on streams, toward which the peasants concerned provided the labor. Also, on a very limited scale we experimented with the introduction of gasoline-motor-driven pumps for irrigation from rivers like the Mekong, especially for double cropping during the dry season.

The final prong in our rice drive was the activation of a marketing mechanism through which the farmer could sell his rice at a fair price. This mechanism, called the Agricultural Development Organization, is dealt with in a later interview.

The Public Safety Division—or, more meaningfully, the Police Division—had as its function the upgrading of the Lao Government Police, through training and the supply of equipment that had to be imported. Shortly after my arrival in Laos, the Director of Lao Police began to court me to obtain my approval of USAID construction of a new police headquarters building in Vientiane. In this undertaking he was supported not only by the man in charge of the AID Mission's Public Safety Division, but also by the head of the Public Safety Division in AID headquarters in Washington. I, however, resisted all of these blandishments, including considerable pressure from the Washington end. I deemed this bricks-and-mortar proposal a low-priority use for AID funds, and stuck to my guns. In fact, the Lao Government eventually financed such a building out of its budgetary funds, but I was never the most popular AID Mission Director among AID's police personnel.

The Training Division of the AID Mission—quite small in personnel numbers, but with its chief holding Assistant Director status—had the important function of trying to assure that the programs of the other substantive divisions incorporated a significant training element. As I have often referred to, the level of competence within the Lao government was generally quite limited. It was, therefore, of prime importance that the AID Mission not only furnish the Lao Ministries with the concrete objects needed, but also improve the capabilities to use them more effectively. Such training could be either on-the-job or more formal, or a combination of both. It was usually done in-country, as being more relevant to the underdeveloped status of Laos than what could be done at a U.S. government department or academic institution.

Outside Vientiane, at the provincial and district levels, the AID Mission structure was as follows: (a) five Regional Representatives called Area Coordinators and each

responsible for two or more provinces, with residence in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Pakse, and Sam Thong (except for the official responsible for Vientiane and Borikhane provinces, who lived in Vientiane), and (b) numerous young Americans, either AID or IVS personnel, working variously at provincial, district, and village level. Some of the latter, such as agricultural and refugee relief personnel, fell under the jurisdiction of both their Regional Representative and their substantive divisions in Vientiane. In fact, the Regional Representatives' line of responsibility ran not only to the Director of the AID Mission, but also their close coordination with the Rural Development Division as well as other substantive division in Vientiane.

The Rural Development Division had both (a) a direct responsibility for the very substantial Refugee Relief and Resettlement activities of the Mission, with about a hundred thousand normally on our rolls, and (b) guidance and support of all the economic and social development activities at province, district and village levels. The chief of this multi-functional division was also at an Assistant Director level.

Turning to the three support divisions of the AID Mission, the Controller's Office, of course, performed the normal audit function associated with it. But, in addition, it executed a crucial task not usually performed by an entity checking the work of others—that is, negotiation of the periodic contracts with our two air companies, Continental and Air America. I attached the highest priority to this assignment as reductions in the contractual fees of those contracts represented one of the two means I relied upon to cut the air costs of the Controller himself, Jim Williams. So highly did I value his abilities and personality that I would gladly have promoted him to succeed the Deputy Director when the latter left after three years or so in 1967. Jim, however, elected to accept AID Washington's offer of an academic year at Harvard University, and I think he probably made the wiser choice from the standpoint of his career.

The Administrative Section also handled functions substantially exceeding those normally pertaining to that office in an AID Mission. Personnel functions were far greater than normal, with five hundred Americans, six hundred third-country nationals, mostly Thai and Filipino, and two thousand Lao on the rolls. Because housing in cow-town Vientiane was both scarce and largely sub-standard, AID had even erected about ninety houses (as I recall) for American staff in an area about six kilometers from

Vientiane. The Administrative Section had to furnish and maintain all of these houses—a function well beyond the norm. In fact, it even operated a furniture-making workshop, and indeed the Director's official residence was mostly furnished from it. So extensive was the load imposed on the Administrative Section that its head also held Assistant Director status, thus making three Assistant Directors instead of the two I had earlier stated.

The Office of Supply Management, the third of the support divisions, I have already described as handling the procurement, shipment, storage and distribution of the broad range of commodities and products programmed for supply to the Lao Government or for use by the Mission itself.

At the point at which the transcription of the taping picks up again in Session 39, Dr. Calkins apparently inquired about the utility of computers both in our campaign for increased rice production and in my subsequent career in general. I responded that we did not use them in the rice program in Laos as statistical collection was much too meager there to warrant it. I added that certainly as Ambassador to Madagascar, no, since the Embassy was such a small operation.]

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [40] of [57]
Date: May 19, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech. I'm continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joe Mendenhall. Today is the nineteenth of May 2006 and our fortieth session, as it happens, Joe. I am here in Lubbock and Joe is in Nevada. First of all, Joe, thanks very much for your time again today. As I discussed off record with you I'd like to review a couple of the things that we talked about last week that unfortunately didn't make it onto the recording.

Joseph Mendenhall: Fine, Laura.

LC: Joe, could you talk a little bit about the ADO?

JM: Yes. The Agriculture Development Organization, as I indicated last week, was probably in many ways one of the most fascinating parts from the emphasis that I was trying to place on increasing rice production in Laos as the beginning measure to really develop that country toward hopefully at some point in the future self-sufficiency and correcting its immense balance of payments deficit. We used to refer to the Agricultural Development Organization by its acronym ADO. So I'll use that today when we're talking. The organization had been established before I arrived in Laos by my predecessor in the AID mission, but had not really begun to operate at all. As a matter of fact, I found that the American who had been chosen to run the organization was totally ineffective and replaced on the recommendation of the agriculture division of the AID mission by another official in that mission. Unfortunately he proved to be just about as ineffective as his predecessor. So after a year or so I was faced with the choice of another American manager to get this organization really into operation. It was in effect doing nothing at that stage. Looking around the mission, where as I have indicated before, I found out that of about five hundred Americans working for the mission there were only about a half-a-dozen who were really effective managers. It was difficult to find someone who could take over the organization. I eventually turned to a twenty-four year old who had fairly recently arrived and been assigned as my staff assistant. He was a very intelligent, dynamic young fellow, fully imbued with the drive which I thought should be placed on increasing rice production in the country and had been extremely

effective in following up on the decisions I made to make sure they were being carried out. So I turned to him to become the manager of this organization, which since I also decided to let him continue to have direct access to me, this was rather out of channel in some respects and therefore hurt the pride of some intervening officials, older and longer experienced and who resented a young whippersnapper coming in to take over, but I never regretted a decision to put him in charge of the mission, in charge of ADO. He really got it started to operating very well during my remaining time in Laos while he was the manager of it. This organization had two essential purposes. One was to provide to the peasants producing rice the inputs necessary for that production at a reasonable price, that is seeds, fertilizer and pesticides essentially, and also to provide an organization to purchase their rice at a fair price to them and market it. Prior to the time that ADO began to function, both of these activities were supplied to the extent that they existed, primarily by Chinese merchants in Laos who tended unfortunately to gouge the peasants on both fronts, the inputs and the outputs. We did not aim to displace these merchants in the private sector, but to provide some price discipline to what they were doing by competing with them on a fairer basis. The organization, as I say, began to purchase seeds—they had to purchase seeds in Thailand because the kind of rice produced and consumed in Laos is called glutinous rice in contrast to the rice which is much better known around the world and consumed in the U.S. and rice consuming countries is non-glutinous rice. In Thailand it is produced primarily in northeastern Thailand, which is essentially inhabited by people very similar to the Lao. They also therefore use glutinous rice as the staple in their diet just as the Lao do. So that's where we had to get seeds. Fertilizer and pesticides, of course, came from the United States under the regular Commodity Procurement Program of AID. The product, the output, the rice produced by the farmers purchased by ADO was then purchased by the AID mission to help fulfill its rice requirements with respect to feeding refugees, the army, etc. Instead of procuring as we had in Thailand previously, we decided to buy from this organization the AID mission had set up to meet our needs for rice in Laos. So we had a ready market for it and we obviously would pay a fair price for it. This organization, ADO, really began to operate as I've indicated, under Don Murray, the name of the young fellow who was heading it. It operated primarily as I recall in its earlier phase in the Vientiane plain. I'm not sure

how extensive it really had spread over Laos. I'm not sure whether we got into southern Laos or not. I just don't remember. The Vientiane plain was one of the principal producing areas. So we could put a lot of emphasis at the outset on that region. Now, Laura, are there other aspects of this that you would like me to go into?

LC: You mentioned the supply management division of the mission. We talked a little bit about this. To what extent were they actually involved in helping with the work of ADO? Was it the Supply Management Division?

JM: The Supply Management Division wasn't really involved with either. Supply Management Division was the one that was involved with the procurement activities of the AID mission as a whole. It may have gotten involved in the purchase of insecticides and fertilizer and probably with the seeds, as well. We procured them through the AID mission and then turned them over to ADO against payment, I assume, since they were going to be resold to the farmers. It was not a vital part of this new device that we had introduced, this Agricultural Development Organization. So the Supply Management Division was an old division of the AID mission, having to do with all of its procurement activities, particularly of commodities. Some services such as our contracts with air companies were not negotiated by that division, but during the time I was there at least were always done by the controller's office, as I think I have indicated. We'll get to this later also. The controller was one of the five or six best employees, most effective employees of the AID mission, a good manager. He was the one who did the negotiating of the air contracts certainly during all the time I was there.

LC: I think you mentioned that there was a young fellow in that division.

JM: Yeah. There was a young fellow in the Supply Management Division who was deeply imbued with the importance of what was then the newfound computer industry and felt that I ought to authorize him to buy many more computers for the mission. He used to say, "We can furnish you much more information through the computers than you can get through your present old-fashioned system in order to be able to make decisions." I said, "My trouble is not that I don't have enough information to make decisions but ninety-five percent of my time is devoted to getting the decisions I've made carried out," because in the normal course of things in any activity, any decision which involves human beings will run into differences of opinion in executing

it. The normal human instinct, as soon as problems of this type of encounter, you run into somebody who is an obstacle to carrying it out is to say, "Well, I can't handle it." So the inclination is to drop it. So the managers all the way up the line, one of their biggest jobs is to resolve these differences and make sure that the decisions do get carried out, otherwise you're not going to achieve any results with the program. This goes back also to another point I raised in an earlier session which I learned later from an AID official by the name of Jim Grant, for whom I worked for about six months. Jim said that even governments, national governments, cannot carry out more than about three or four major objectives and programs to achieve those objectives effectively because attention is spread too widely. So too many things fall between the cracks and decisions are made, but they don't get executed. I had a similar problem in a smaller compass in Laos. My experience certainly confirmed what I learned in a larger sphere and context under Jim Grant.

LC: As I think you made it clear earlier, Joe, rice production was one of those few areas that you felt the AID mission had to concentrate on for a number of reasons.

JM: That's right. It was really the number one objective in terms of economic development, which was the second major strategic area which I had decided upon, the first being to continue the humanitarian and war-related activities which I had inherited from my predecessors, the second being economic development and the third, which we'll get to a little later, being cost-cutting.

LC: Very good.

JM: Those were the three major strategic objectives I was pursuing.

LC: With Don Murray at the head, ADO seems to have had, at least as I recall you saying last week, made some progress.

JM: Oh, it certainly got launched under him and was perking along very nicely. There was one other aspect which I raised last week, which I think we need to mention here.

LC: Yes.

JM: Eventually, of course, it would be desirable to turn over the management and operation of ADO from Americans to Lao personnel because we were operating in Laos. Eventually the host government should take responsibility for any AID activity. That

was an area in which I didn't really see what the solution would be because if I could find very few Americans who were effective managers, looking around Laos it was even more difficult. So it was very hard to envisage down the road how this organization could be taken on by the Lao. Don Murray did tell me he had one young Lao employee in whom he imposed considerable confidence that he thought might offer the possibility of heading the organization at some time in the future. On the other hand, if and when that time arrived then would come to question of his salary. If he was paid the same salary as Lao government employees at his level of responsibility, then there would be a great temptation for him with considerable money flowing through his organization to begin to cream it off. This is the old corruption problem which exists in almost all under-developed countries because government salaries are necessarily low because the government doesn't have the resources to pay more, but then there's always the temptation on the part of those who have the possibility in those governments to begin to cream off some additional money for themselves. This is the great problem of corruption, which I see no real solution for except through gradual development of countries which will enable gradual increases in salaries. In other words, it's an endemic problem, which could only gradually be resolved over time.

LC: As we think back over the experience of the United States it's certainly not a problem that was solved easily, quickly, or finally.

JM: Well, no. As a matter of fact, we still have it even with our very high levels of income and great prosperity and high levels of salaries in the government. We still have it in America. It's never resolved totally, but it's certainly under much better control in the developed countries than it is in the less developed countries. After all, even regimes which are not democracies in a political sense such as China and Vietnam, corruption is one of the major problems they face today. So it's not just in democracies that this problem exists.

LC: Absolutely. Totalitarianism doesn't guarantee—in fact, it may guarantee that corruption continues.

JM: Yes, because there's much more state control.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JM: One of the great problems that India has confronted over the years since its

independence, particularly when it was still pursuing a socialist path rather than a free market path is that so much activity in the economic sphere required government approval licensing and so forth that the opportunities for corruption were enormous. Because if you have to get a government approval license or approval in some other respect, all too often you have to pay off. So an argument for moving from the socialist concepts in managing an economy to a free market one is that there is really less opportunity then for government officials and servants to intervene and demand bribes. So that's an additional argument as to why the free market approach is superior to a socialist approach.

LC: Joe, I think you've retraced our steps very well and I thank you for doing that. You had some areas I think that you had reviewed to talk about today. Can you give us a sense of those?

JM: Yes, right. We can proceed now. The other economic development sphere which we engaged in to some extent related to lumber production in Laos. Part of Laos had fairly substantial forests. So there was potential to begin to produce lumber in that country for export to Thailand where the need existed for imports. Therefore we began to make loans to a Lao-Chinese businessman in this area so that he could purchase through AID logging equipment, sawmill equipment and transport equipment in order to begin in Laos to exploit its timber resources. The device that was used for this was an industrial development bank, which had been set up by the Lao government and was, until this possibility of loans in the lumber production area came into existence was really just a shell. I remember when the Industrial Development Bank was inaugurated in a ceremony by the Lao minister of finance, Sisouk na Champassak. I can remember that morning very well. We had what I called a little Lao French ceremony. In other words, a Lao ceremony modeled on the way the French do this sort of thing where you formally open a new organization and drink champagne and eat little *madeleines*, which I think we called—what do we call these—lady fingers I think in the States. This was a very French type of celebration to open this organization. I remember we drank a bottle of champagne and ate these *madeleines* after the organization was opened. This showed the continued existence of some French cultural approaches in Laos after the decades of French control even though the French were no longer in control at that stage. So this was

the mechanism that was used to extend loans to the Lao-Chinese businessman to begin the development of the lumber trucks. I understand that now, what, thirty years after the communists have taken over Laos, that lumber production has become considerably more important in the country. So it is an area that got started by AID and has been subsequently expanded and exploited in Laos.

LC: Joe, let me ask a little bit about the bank. Were its assets provided by the United States essentially?

JM: Yeah. This was the only activity in which the bank engaged while I was there. So the answer has to be yes, Laura.

LC: Okay. Okay. Who was the governor of the bank? Did it have a board?

JM: Laura, I can't even remember what the organization was. I think probably the Lao minister of finance must have headed it since he was the one who organized the ceremony for its inauguration.

LC: Right. Right.

JM: So it must have been headed by him. He was an official with whom I worked very closely and knew extremely well. So there was no problem in the collaboration between AID and the Lao government with respect to this institution.

LC: Because the ceremony was so typically Francophone in its styling, I wonder if the French were invited.

JM: No, because they were not contributing to the organization.

LC: So that would have been a bit—

JM: At least I don't recall that there was any Frenchmen there.

LC: Did Nonie accompany you?

JM: No. I don't think ladies were present. I think this was a bachelor function, Laura.

LC: I see. How was the champagne?

JM: Oh, I think it was good French champagne, I'm sure, because there wasn't a lot of champagne produced in Laos. So I think it was very good French champagne. I think whenever champagne was served in Laos, which was not often, but it was always French champagne.

LC: Was the lumber production that was envisaged at that time a particular kind

of wood, like that something we might recognize like teak or something like that?

JM: I cannot remember, Laura, but I would imagine it was some kind of tropical hardwood, but I suppose not necessarily. I can't remember what the kind of lumber it was. Laura, while we're on this subject, something occurs to me which I would like to describe to you, which is tangentially relevant to what we're talking about and that is the existence of forests in Laos. I recall at some point in Laos, I guess it was during the last year I was there, Nonie and I were invited by the Lao minister of public works, my good friend Ngon Sananikone, to accompany him over a trail that had been blazed by the Laos army under General Kouprasith. It was in his military region and Kouprasith had married into the Sananikone family. So there was family connections on the Lao side of this. Kouprasith had arranged this and Ngon Sananikone invited me and Nonie to join him in a big Lao army truck which I'm sure had been furnished through our military aid program to go on this trail through a heavily-forested area and arrive at an isolated village, a village accessible only by air prior to the time this—well, still really accessible only by air because let me describe this three or four hour journey. We bumped for three or four hours over a very crude trail that had been bulldozed through this forest with big holes, getting stuck every once in a while and getting waterlogged at times, finally arriving at this little isolated village where incidentally we had an IVS, International Voluntary Service, volunteer working in this village with the Lao. So there was some AID interest in this and I was glad to get in there since I never had been to visit this particular volunteer. It took the entire morning and I guess a little bit in the afternoon to get into the village and General Kouprasith had said he would send a Lao army helicopter to pick us up so we wouldn't have the three- to four-hour journey back through the forest. Well, it turned out a thunderstorm had developed and he was unable to send the helicopter into the village.

LC: Oh, no.

JM: So we had to spend the night there. It was not a particularly secure area. There were communists in the area. So I was a bit concerned, particularly with Nonie with me, about spending the night. Somehow cots were produced and set up in the local school for us to sleep on with I guess a couple of light blankets. After a very sweaty tropical day, I felt in need of a shower. The only way to take a shower was at the

village well. I think this was a dug well, not a drilled well because I don't think we could get drilling equipment in there. A dug well had been dug through AID assistance, supervised by this IVS volunteer. So I decided to take my bath at the local village well. My minister of public works friend, he lent me his Lao sarong, similar to what you've seen on, I think, Indonesians in the sarongs which you wrap around you and somehow tuck in and they stay—have you seen certain Indonesian men wearing them?

LC: Yes.

JM: They're sort of in a way like long skirts. Well, I got one of these and went out to take my bath, I guess getting buckets of water from the well and the dipper pouring over me. The only problem was I never managed to learn how to keep the sarong tie tied. So it kept falling off and I had village girls around to their immense delight as the sarong would fall off. I would struggle to get it back up again and try to keep it on. So that is an experience which I well remember with Mendenhall, the director of the AID mission, providing amusement to the local village girls as he tried to take a shower. (Laughs)

LC: All for the good of the country.

JM: Yeah, right. We did spent the night there without further ado and a helicopter was sent in to lift us out the next day and get us back to Vientiane, I guess which was about forty-five minutes by helicopter from where we were.

LC: Was it thought that the trail was a precursor to a road or was it going to be a logging trail?

JM: I think that's what the Lao government hoped. Let's call this a Lao military civic action activity which was designed to try to tie that village and that particular area of Laos more closely into the Lao government and the Lao economy since it never previously had any means of communication other than, I suppose, walking in or in the modern day and age going in by helicopter.

LC: Joe, can you give a sense of the terrain, the situation of the village? Where was it?

JM: Well, it was in the province of Vientiane, which was one of the main provinces. Of course, Vientiane was the provincial capital of that province. It was in the northwestern section of the province. That province was fairly extensive. Much of it

was a plain, but there were areas, quite obviously, that were still forested or jungle. This one was, as I said, previously totally inaccessible. I can mention other areas of Laos which were accessible only by air, too. While we're doing this, since I may not get to this, there was an area in the southern part of the province of Sayaboury, which was just west of Vientiane Province. It was that province of Laos which was totally west of the Mekong River, which I have mentioned.

LC: Yes.

JM: The very southern part of that province, there was no means of surface ingress and egress. Everybody had to either walk in or be flown in. I once went to that area with my friend Ngon Sananikone and also with the director of agriculture. Ngon was also minister of national economy and the director of agriculture, among others, was under his jurisdiction there. I remember we visited that area where we also had some AID activities going on as we did in some other isolated areas. Then a third area, and this one in many ways the most fascinating of all, this was north of Vientiane Province. I can't remember if it was the southern part of Luang Prabang Province or whether there was one in between. I'm not sure. Anyway, it was an area north of Vientiane and north of the neutralist town or city of Vang Vieng, which you've heard me mention.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: It was north of there, north and northwest between the old road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, which we were working to reopen, as I've already indicated, and the Mekong River. This was also an isolated valley into which, remarkably enough, the wheel had never penetrated, if you can imagine. The only way of getting around that valley by transport was by raft on the river. There were no wheeled even carts, which had existed almost since time immemorial. Nothing of that sort. To me that was—ironically enough, there was also canned beer we found in that isolated valley into which the wheel had not penetrated. I suppose it had been flown in somewhere because I remember we got a few cans of warm beer while we were there.

LC: No kidding.

JM: There was no electricity and no way of keeping it cool so we drank British-type beer, shall I say, during that visit. So you can see there were some extremely fascinating areas of Laos. I suppose in an ethnological sense that one can scarcely

imagine a modern country having this kind of area where the wheel had never penetrated it before.

LC: Joe, that brings up a question which I don't know whether you'd like to field now or at some future time, but were there academics from America or perhaps even people who were employed by the Smithsonian or anyone like that coming over to do studies of any anthropological kind? Do you remember while you were there?

JM: I don't believe there were even though as these experiences indicate there were certainly some fascinating aspects. I don't recall any, Laura. I think I have also mentioned up in northwestern Laos in Houa Khong Province, I flew up there one time with the deputy prime minister. I think I mentioned he had never been in that province and asked me the next time I went whether he could accompany us. I said, "Certainly." We visited some of the most fascinating—I think I discussed this before—but some of the most fascinating tribal areas with vast differences in dress, customs among these tribal peoples. From an anthropological standpoint, I would have thought that would have been one of the most fascinating areas in the world to study as you've just suggested here. I remember seeing what I would call the original mini-skirt there, virtually covering nothing. So you've just raised an interesting point I think from the anthropological and ethnological standpoint. Even in a country of very limited population, Laos, there would be I think fascinating and diverse peoples to study.

LC: Absolutely. Absolutely. A lot of—well, I don't know a lot, but some work of this type has gone on under the post-1975 Lao government.

JM: Yes.

LC: But I just wondered whether—of course, this was a war zone.

JM: No, as far as I'm aware there was none of that kind of study during the time I was there.

LC: Yeah. Just remind me, Joe, you were not in the habit of taking photographs on a regular basis.

JM: No. No. I don't know whether I've told you this, Laura. A film got stuck in my camera in 1960 when we visited Hue in central Vietnam and I've never taken a picture since.

LC: I think you might have told me that. Yeah.

JM: When I did try I found I usually got a half an individual. So I have sons-in-law who are very expert cameramen, but not myself.

LC: Well, luckily you have it all upstairs and can share it with us. The trip that you made with the deputy prime minister, who was that, Joe?

JM: Leuam Insisiengmay. Want me to spell that?

LC: Can you?

JM: Yes. L-E-U-A-M was his first name. Second name, let me see. I think I-N-S-I-S-I-E-N-G-M-A-I [Insisiengmay]. As I think I have indicated, Laura, Lao and Thai surnames are extremely long, as you can see. One really has to work on committing them to memory.

LC: Yes, and I'll bet that consumes some effort, absolutely. Was he a member of one of the clans that you've spoken of before?

JM: His family was extremely important in Savannakhet Province, Savannakhet being the principal town in south-central Laos. His family did not live in Savannakhet. They lived in a village called Kengkok, K-E-N-G-K-O-K, which was I would say about twenty-five minutes by—I guess we used to fly, what was it, C-47s or so? I can't remember now. Anyway, about twenty-five minutes by air east of Savannakhet, but that was his area where he was certainly the most important political figure in Savannaket Province.

LC: Were there other members of his family that came to Vientiane and had that kind of status?

JM: No. I don't recall any others and I will—Laura, while we're talking about Lao families, I might just indicate—you I think said the last time at some point you'd be interested in talking about the various aspects of the war in Laos. Now this is an aspect which occurs to me now and I'm going to raise.

LC: Sure.

JM: Prominent Lao families lost a number of their sons in the war. Leuam Insisiengmay lost his only two sons. The first was a lieutenant in the infantry who was killed fighting the communists in Laos. The second joined the Lao air force and was killed, I believe in an accident, but perhaps while engaging the enemy. I'm not sure about that. So he lost his only two sons in the war. Then Ngon Sananikone, whom I

have just talked about who was the number two man in the very significant Sananikone family, lost his oldest son. He had quite a few sons. I think he had about nine children. I believe eight of them were sons. He lost his oldest one who was really the apple of his eye and whom he looked to as his heir. That one I know was in an air accident. The boy's plane went down and because of the lack of any real search-and-rescue activity on the part of the Lao air force he actually bled to death unfortunately. He didn't die immediately. If he had been rescued in time he would have survived, but he unfortunately bled to death. So he lost the apple of his eye. Then a third young man whom I can remember who was one who lived next door to us in Vientiane. His father was either a brother or half-brother of Souvanna Phouma. I'm trying to think of what his name was. Anyway, this young man who was a very close friend of our girls, he was considerably older, but I remember we later found out he was even taking our young girls on his motorcycle to our consternation, a very nice young fellow. He later also joined the air force and was killed, again I'm not sure whether by accident or in enemy action. So, prominent Lao political families, leading Lao political families, really lost sons in the war against the communists. So I think that's worth getting into the record while I think of it.

LC: Now was this the young man who I think you may have mentioned earlier was on a helicopter ride and landed in an area that had been taken by communists?

JM: Oh, no. That was a son of an American.

LC: Oh, I'm sorry.

JM: Yeah. That was the son of the AID mission's representative in Luang Prabang. His name was John Perry. His two sons were on that helicopter, which had landed in an area that had been taken overnight by the communists, unbeknownst to the pilot. The communists as it started to take off began to fire on them and killed one son and seriously wounded the other one who hovered between life and death for a while, but eventually survived. No, these were sons of an American employee at the AID mission.

LC: I see. I just had a quick flash of you having mentioned this.

JM: No. We knew that family extremely well. As a matter of fact, we still see the son who survived and the daughter in the family from time to time in Washington.

The son lives in Paris and the daughter lives in Washington. The son comes over I think once a year and our middle daughter, Priscilla, is still very close to both of them.

LC: Joe, I think it is the case that probably most Americans, and including some scholars of the war in Laos, are not fully tuned into the fact that many of these prominent very senior family members in the most important clans in Laos were actually not only involved in the war, but some of them gave their lives in the war.

JM: Right. When I say "joined the Lao air force" I certainly don't want to convey the impression that this was a modern air force with a wide range of planes. The only thing they had were very crude T-28s, training planes which had been furnished by the United States. When they'd bomb they would drop bombs from these crude trainers. So joining the air force in Laos was hazardous from the outset because as I've indicated they certainly didn't have the kind of organization that could act effectively in case anything went amiss. It was brave enough joining the organization and certainly quite a number of them as I've just indicated lost their lives as a result.

LC: Although the equipment was very much outdated, T-28s by 1965. That's—yeah.

JM: Oh, yeah. Even the head of the air force, General Ma, when he went on bombing missions, would fly one of these little T-28s which are simply fabric-covered planes, as I recall.

LC: Yes. Yes. They're practically gliders just with like a lawnmower engine on them or something. Joe, was it seen as a rite of passage or some kind of political test of courage or something for these young men to join the air force?

JM: I think it was adventure. A lot of them saw this as young men challenged by an adventurous activity. I say, I think the same reason a lot of young American youth joined our Air Force at various stages, including during World War II and subsequently.

LC: Yes. There is something particular about the folks who try to get into the Air Force. I think that's accurate.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, just to clarify, the AID mission did not, if I'm right, have anything to do with the purchase of aircraft like this. Is that correct?

JM: Well, only through the fact that we administered the military aid program,

Laura, but as I have said I didn't involve myself deeply in that because the ambassador took a very close interest himself. Even though we had a division in the AID mission called the Requirements Division, which was manned by retired American military personnel, which really handled the details of the administration of that program, I didn't follow it closely. These planes had been furnished earlier, anyway. They were not supplied to the Lao government during the time I was there.

LC: So was it by more or less mutual agreement between yourself and Ambassador Sullivan that he handled that whereas you ran all the other programs?

JM: Yeah, it was certainly a tacit agreement I would say, Laura. I don't know that we ever really discussed this closely, but since he had a daily staff meeting and the head of that division in AID was the only division head in AID who ever attended those staff meetings. I think I took him once a week to those staff meetings, which also indicates the direct communication between him and the ambassador.

LC: Joe, can you just reprise for me for a moment the size of the AID budget in Laos between '65 and what was its growth over the—

JM: The economic aid budget was about fifty million dollars a year and the military aid budget was about a hundred-and-fifty million dollars a year. So the two totaled about two hundred million dollars.

LC: Did that grow over the period you were there?

JM: No. I, because of my cost cutting activity, aimed among other things at trying to prevent the economic aid budget from growing and the military aid budget did not either, I don't believe. I think it stayed more or less the same. Those figures were pretty level as I recall during the three years I was there.

LC: Okay. Let's take a break there, Joe. Go ahead, Joe.

JM: Laura, we were talking about the sacrifice of important Lao families of sons in the families in the war against the communists. One of the ceremonies which I remember, most touching ceremonies I attended during all the time I was in Laos occurred in Kengkok when the remains of the older son of Leuam Insisiengmay, the deputy prime minister, were placed in what the Buddhist call the *stupa*, which is a little niche on a pole, is I guess about the best way to describe it. This was a very elaborate ceremony. The prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, had gone down and most of the

ambassadors in Vientiane and I was there also. What particularly touched everyone to the core was when Leuam stood up in front of the *stupa* and made a speech about his son with the tears streaming down his face. I have never forgotten that at all. It moved everybody tremendously. In a more mundane plane I can remember we also had lunch in Leuam's house there. All the dignitaries did. That was the first time, I think, that I had ever eaten tamarinds. Do you know what tamarind is?

LC: I do, but for someone who doesn't can you describe it?

JM: As I recall, Laura, now this may not be quite accurate, as I recall they sort of look like a peanut on the outside. You open up this shell and there's, oh, I guess a—I'm trying to remember very precisely—but inside there is, I think, a seed and around it a sort of sticky, deep reddish substance which is what you put into your mouth and suck on. I think both Nonie and I found we liked tamarinds very much. Obviously since you know them you've eaten them. Is that a pretty accurate description of them?

LC: Yes, I think that's pretty good actually. That is accurate. I haven't had them in quite a while, but you're right.

JM: I can't remember any other occasion when I ever ate them as a matter of fact, but I do remember that particular day.

LC: Well, it sounds like it was quite a somber moment.

JM: Oh, it was. It was a deeply impressive ceremony which has always remained with me. While we're talking about ceremonies, I think I've mentioned this one also before in our sessions. When Leuam's daughter was married in Vientiane, this was well after this first son's funeral ceremony and the second son was killed after we left Laos. So it was between the death of the two sons. His daughter was married in again a big ceremony in Laos held in Leuam's house there, which all the leading Lao officials as well as ambassadors attended.

LC: Down at Kengkok again?

JM: No. This was in Vientiane itself. I remember that was the ceremony to which I took the president of Continental Airlines and his wife, Bob Six and his movie star wife, Audrey Meadows. Nonie and I took them to this ceremony and they thought this was just great. This was obviously the kind of thing that they had never seen before. They saw all the Lao participating and the foreigners and the Americans there. They

chalked this up as one of the greatest experiences in their life and couldn't stop talking about it.

LC: No kidding.

JM: I think I indicated that I had been a little leery about whether I would enjoy any relations to speak of with Six because one of his vice presidents, Salinger—now, what was Salinger's name, first name, I can't think of it at the moment, who was a cousin of Nonie's stepfather, but a vice president of Continental who on his second visit to Laos totally cold-shouldered us because we were cutting back so much on what we were paying Continental in costs per flying hour.

LC: Even though—

JM: Six was just as friendly as he could be during the whole time he was there and his wife deeply enjoyed and chalked it up as a great experience, taking them to this wedding ceremony of Leuam's daughter.

LC: As you said, there were most of the diplomatic corps there.

JM: Oh, yeah. All the Leading Lao officials, including the prime minister, were there.

LC: Where was it held, Joe?

JM: It was in Leuam's house.

LC: Okay. In his own house?

JM: Yes. Mm-hmm

LC: Well, it sounds like it must have been quite the occasion.

JM: There may have been a ceremony in the pagoda before, but maybe this was what we would call the reception. I can't remember whether there was any actual ceremony in the house. There certainly was a huge reception.

LC: Was it a political marriage, do you think?

JM: I don't recall that it was. I don't remember whom she married actually, Laura, so I don't think it was important in any political sense.

LC: I see, except that, of course, he was involved and she was his daughter.

JM: Right

LC: Well, thanks, Joe.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [41] of [57]
Date: June 16, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I'm continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the sixteenth of June 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking from his home in Nevada. First of all, good morning, Joe, and thank you for your time.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, we're still talking about the period that you spent as head of the AID mission in Laos between 1965 and 1968. Today I believe we want to talk about another part of the development program that the United States had in place.

JM: Right. Laura, just let me put that into context. We have been discussing what I regarded as my three major strategic objectives in Laos. The first one was continuing with the humanitarian and war-related activities of the AID mission which I had inherited from my predecessor. Second was trying to bring Laos or at least start Laos on the path of a more sustainable position financially since the country had an overwhelming balance of payments deficit of about one million in exports and getting about fifty million in aid from us. We were in the process—we've already dealt with most of the aspects of that program. I think we're down to the roads program aspect of the development objective. The third objective, which I think we'll probably reach today, too, being cost-cutting and shifting any savings to the development aspects of my three major objectives.

LC: Very good.

JM: Let's launch into the roads program. I've already dealt with some aspects of the roads program in previous interviews. One, which we have talked about, was the reconstruction of the road which the French had built during their period of control of Laos from Vientiane, the administrative capital, to Luang Prabang, the royal capital where the king resided.

LC: Right.

JM: Most of that road, through the years of war and hostilities, had fallen into disrepair. So it had to be renovated in a major sense. The only portion that was

really still usable was that immediately north of Vientiane in the Vientiane plain. I'm going to guess at the distances. None of these distances should be taken as gospel. I would suppose that was about, oh, thirty to forty kilometers which was still useable going directly north of Vientiane in the plain area. Then when it reached the foothills of the mountains and the jungle area that had to be completely redone in order to make it useable. That leg of this Vientiane-to-Luang Prabang road was pretty well finished by the time I arrived. In fact, we participated in a ceremony inaugurating the bridge over the Nam Lik River N-A-M, second word L-I-K, River in early 1966, a ceremony which had been organized by the Lao government. Our representative was not myself as head of the mission, but the head of AID in Washington, Dave Bell, who happened to be on a visit. We had Dave represent the U.S. government in the inauguration of this bridge. This bridge was not a very fancy one. It was simply a bailey bridge, which as I think most people know was really an assembly job of various parts of a bridge which had I think been developed by the U. S. Army probably during World War II or perhaps even earlier, I don't know. But for Laos this was a major project. So this leg of this artery was, I would say, perhaps somewhere between ten and twenty kilometers and the first major part of it, of course, was bridging this fairly substantially-sized river as far as the rivers in Laos went, all of which were tributaries of the Mekong, which of course was the major river flowing through and forming much of the border of the country. The second leg of this road project was the one from the river Nam Lik to Vang Vieng, which was as I've discussed before, the center of the neutralists forces' political, well rather military than political. The political head of it was Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister. The chief military man in it was the diminutive, originally-captain who had been promoted to general, Kong Le. This was also a distance, I would say, of probably twenty kilometers. So I can remember the first time I flew into Vang Vieng because Vang Vieng was completely inaccessible by road, which my visit confirmed because while I was in Vang Vieng I was driven south out of the town and pretty soon we found the road utterly impassable. It had been completely closed over by jungle.

LC: Wow.

JM: So it was utterly impassable. I also want to say at this point, Laura, that this road project, like all the road projects we undertook in Laos except the repaving of

the streets of Vientiane after the flood of 1966, none of these roads were paved. The small population and very low level of development of Laos and the amount of traffic likely to use the roads didn't warrant paving in any sense. All the road projects were compacted-earth-type of road construction. So this is the kind of thing that we attempted to do in the way of roads.

LC: Would that produce an all-weather surface more or less?

JM: Yes. Laura, I just want to mention one more leg and then I'll get back to this.

LC: Very good. Very good.

JM: The third leg of our project was from Vang Vieng, the neutralist center, to Muang Kasi. Again I'm going to guess the distance, maybe another twenty to thirty kilometers. Not quite to the point on the Vientiane-Luang Prabang road where a road branched east going to the rather well known Plain of Jars, which during all the years I was in Laos was in contention between the communist forces and the rightist-neutralist forces in the government. Everything, of course, before the renovation of this road going to Vang Vieng and to the Plain of Jars, had to be flown in at a very substantial expense. I will say that, going back to the type of construction, that the savings to our aid programs in Laos from the ability to shift from air to surface transportation very quickly gave these road projects or road segments a positive cost-benefit outcome very, very rapidly. Now I want to go on, Laura, to revert to the type of construction. In a tropical country subject to heavy monsoon rains this kind of construction, of course, required frequent maintenance in order to keep it viable and the second major aspect of the Bureau of Public Roads project in Laos and this road was being reconstructed by the Bureau of Public Roads, which was I think then was probably an agency of the Department of Commerce. Later I think the Department of Transportation. I'm not sure transportation existed at that stage in the U.S. government as a separate department, but anyway.

LC: I think you might be right.

JM: It was an agency in Washington attached to one of the cabinet departments. We had, I would say, somewhere between ten and twenty Bureau of Public Roads people in this project on long-term mission resulting from an agreement from AID Washington and the Bureau of Public Roads in Washington. So the first major aspect of this

program of this bureau in Laos was, as I indicated, this road project from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. The second major activity of the Bureau of Public Roads group was to upgrade the Lao Ministry of Public Works so that it could be hopefully put into a position someday where it could undertake the repair and maintenance of all the roads in Laos without extensive U.S. assistance. Nonie just walked in. So I was interrupted for a moment. This was, as I indicated, the second major aspect of the Bureau of Public Roads activity in Laos. Now, we provided technical advice and training to personnel in the Ministry of Public Works. We provided equipment and materials right down to cement and everything that this outfit needed, both to engage in the major road project. Incidentally, we were not using a contractor on this project. It was done by our Bureau of Public Roads and Ministry of Public Works personnel with equipment and materials that we furnished. Then we also had to help the Ministry of Public Works develop a maintenance center in order to keep the equipment that we supplied in operation.

LC: Where was that center, at Vientiane?

JM: In Vientiane. I suppose eventually we must've envisaged having some sub centers in other parts of the country, but we certainly started out with one in Vientiane. Now the level of technical competence in the Lao Ministry of Public Works, as in any ministry of that government, was extremely low. So this aspect of the Bureau of Public Roads program had to be envisaged as a very long term one. It would take a long time to get that ministry of the government into a position where it could undertake on its own to keep the roads maintained and in repair. Incidentally, I might just say at this point when I was subsequently ambassador to Madagascar, I found quite a number of roads, and these were paved roads, which had been constructed with loans from the World Bank. Because Madagascar was in the same position, more or less, as Laos with respect to the ability to maintain roads already constructed these roads were rapidly disintegrating, unfortunately showing that the loans by the World Bank pretty soon the results would be negative rather than positive. So that it's absolutely necessary in any of these developing countries with a low level of technical competence to put as much stress on maintenance and repair as it is on original construction. I may just mention a somewhat similar problem develops with respect to a lot of construction projects undertaken by both the U.S. AID agency and by international aid agencies. They put a

lot of money into constructing hospitals, for example, or schools and then find that the local government has neither the personnel nor the funds to operate them. So these problems run generally throughout aid programs, particularly in countries at a low level of development.

LC: I'm sure that's true for charitable institutions, as well, who might build a clinic somewhere.

JM: Yes.

LC: You get a big bang at the front end for building, developing and creating and then, of course, on the back end, if you will, the operational end where—

JM: I think I've already mentioned for example the hospital in Vang Vieng which AID financed for political reasons because it was in the neutralist center. Once it was constructed the Lao didn't have the personnel to operate it so we had to expand our contract with Filipino organization, Operation Brotherhood, which was already manning and operating a half a dozen rudimentary hospitals throughout the country, to add this one to their activities. So we had the same problem. That's a concrete example of the problem, in Laos of the problem I was just talking about in general.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: So this was one of the major road programs. The one operated by the Bureau of Public Roads personnel who were attached and under the control of the AID mission. We also had, as I've indicated in past interviews, a Public Works Division of the AID mission headed by a very competent construction man who did not have an engineering degree, but who'd had abundant experience and had proved one of the best persons on the AID mission payroll. We had what I think no other AID mission had in the world including the one in Vietnam because of this division and the experience of the man who headed it. We had our own construction capability. I've already mentioned this before and I've talked about the road project which was undertaken during the last year I was there to build a road from the Vientiane plain up through very difficult mountainous and jungle country to the two centers in northeastern Laos of the operation by the hill people, the Meo, supported by AID and CIA. That, as I've indicated, was just getting underway when I left Laos. Now that was a responsibility of the Public Works Division. Other projects—that was the biggest project that had ever been undertaken by

that division. Lesser projects which I'll discuss now included in the province of Sayaboury, the northwestern province of Laos up to the west of the Mekong road projects to connect areas where we were placing emphasis on rice production to connect those areas to the Mekong River so the rice that we hoped would be produced in those areas would be sent to Luang Prabang, which was very much a rice deficient area in terms of its own production. So we were undertaking a project in central Laos which I've described earlier with a major irrigation project also undertaken by the Public Works Division in a refugee area. We also had to build and renovate roads which would connect this production area with the Mekong. That was also a major undertaking by our Public Works Division. Then in northern Sayaboury province, in an isolated valley called Hong Sa, H-O-N-G, second word, S-A, the Public Works Division built a road to connect that isolated valley to the Mekong. I think now, this one I'm not sure of, Laura, but I think we also undertook through the Public Works Division to connect another isolated valley west of there in Sayaboury province with the Mekong for the same reason. This particular valley, the name of which unfortunately I can't recall, the only access it had by surface to the world was through Thailand. When we proposed to build a road to connect it with the Mekong River the Lao government very quickly agreed with it because for strategic reasons because of the long history of aggressive intent by Thailand against Laos. The government was delighted at the idea of having that valley connected by road with the Mekong. It's unfortunate I can't remember the name of that valley because I once stayed overnight in it with the director of agriculture of the Lao government who often traveled with me because of our emphasis on agricultural development. I can remember after a day of travel we were extremely dusty and dirty. I remember the two of us took a bath in the stream through that valley. We stayed overnight there. So I think that was the third one, which I can't identify further, in northwestern Laos. [It was the Xiong Lom Valley.]

LC: Now did the valley that you're describing, it must have had an airstrip.

JM: Oh, yes. That's the way we got in.

LC: Okay. Uh-huh. Would it be somewhere up by Nam Tha?

JM: No. Nam Tha, I think—let's see. No. I thought Nam Tha was northeast of Luang Prabang, but I may be wrong.

LC: Northwest.

JM: I think Nam Tha may be in the northwestern province that is north of Sayaboury on the other side of the Mekong.

LC: I think that's right.

JM: I think Nam Tha is in that province. I believe it is.

LC: Yes. I think you're right.

JM: Yeah. I think Nam Tha is way up close to the Chinese border.

LC: Yes. Mm-hmm.

JM: Yeah. No, it would not have been at Nam Tha because we didn't have access to that. That was usually under communist control, although at one point during my stay in Laos the CIA mounted an operation against Nam Tha which proved to be in and out very quickly, which I never thought accomplished much. I'm pretty sure that was Nam Tha. No. This was not Nam Tha. It was south of there on the other side of the Mekong, let's say on the Thai side of the Mekong.

LC: Okay.

JM: Yeah. Now, Laura, I want to shift to southern Laos where our Public Works Division also undertook quite a number of road projects. There was a main road which had been built by the French all the way from Vientiane down to Pakse and beyond, which connected central with southern Laos, which more or less paralleled the Mekong. That road was still usable, by and large, without major activity being undertaken by the AID mission, but what we did do was to build some roads that connected with that road or with other roads that did connect them. I'm going to mention three. One was to connect the provincial capital of Saravane with that road. The provincial capital that was on that road was called Vapikham Thong. You want me to spell that?

LC: If you can, sure.

JM: W-A-P-I-K-A-M-T-H-O-N-G (Vapikham Thong). That's all one word. Vapikham Thong was on the main north-south road, but our project was to connect the capital Saravane province—also called, the city or town was called Saravane—with that road at Vapkiham Thong. Now that I would say was probably a, oh, I don't know, probably thirty- to forty-kilometer road project. In the summer of 1967, the minister of

public works and I decided to take an inspection tour of southern Laos and particularly of these road projects that we were undertaking. This particular one had been finished by that stage. We decided we would drive from Vapikham Thong to Saravane, but before I get to that I first want to mention how we got to southern Laos. The minister decided to take three of his sons with him on the airplane with us and I had my three daughters, the two who had been with us in Laos in school and the third one who was in college and who was out for the summer. So we had the minister, myself, three of his sons and three of my daughters all in Caribou, which was a Canadian short take-off-and-landing aircraft flying south from Vientiane to Pakse, which was the principal town in southern Laos. The day we had decided to take this journey the cloud cover was very heavy. So we flew that whole distance of about two hours about five hundred feet above the Mekong so the pilot could see where he was going, just wheeling along this river all the way south. The Caribou had a rear cargo door. As usual, when I flew in either planes or helicopters I wanted to see the countryside and any AID activities that were going on from the air. So I told the pilot, "Leave that cargo door open on the way down so we can look out." There were no windows in the airplane. That's the only way we could see out at all. So we could see what was on the ground. We had cargo lashed in the aisle in the middle and all of us were seated in bucket seats on either side of the cargo. Well, we had flown along for quite some distance, bouncing up and down because there was considerable turbulence and zigzagging along the Mekong. Well, all of a sudden my good friend the minister, Ngon Sananikone, got up. He was usually very equable and easy-going and almost shook his fist in my face and said, "Get that pilot to close that door because this cargo is going to be shaken loose and we'll all be thrust out of that cargo door to our doom." So I told the pilot to close the door. Within about five minutes all of his three sons had gotten airsick because there was no longer any air in the airplane and I looked at Ngon and he smiled rather wanly at me, realizing one of the reasons I wanted the cargo door open. I can't remember now whether we had it open again after that or not. Anyway, we landed in Pakse to spend the night there before we were going to undertake our inspection activities. The province chief gave a dinner in our honor, the dignitaries from Vientiane. Nonie, who was enjoying everything, suddenly let drop, "Oh, it would have been nice if we could have danced." Well, her

mere suggestion proved to be a command because within about five minutes all of us were ushered off to a Pakse nightclub. Just as we arrived we saw the last of the prostitution customers being taken out of this nightclub. We spent the rest of the evening in the nightclub dancing to the great joy of Ngon's three sons and our three daughters.

LC: Do you remember the music, Joe?

JM: Oh, any music in Laos is good dance music.

LC: I'm sure that's true. I'm sure that's true.

JM: The next morning I remember my minister friend, Ngon, ordered *pho*, the famous Vietnamese soup from the Vietnamese restaurant and that was our breakfast. We all had Vietnamese *pho* for breakfast the next morning.

LC: Very good.

JM: Then they started undertaking our surface journeys. We traveled north from Pakse to Vapikham Thong. Then east along this road, which had been built or rebuilt by our Public Works Division. I will say that I guess within the next week or two after I got back to Vientiane I read a CIA report that a Viet Cong group of about six hundred had crossed that road just about the time we were traveling east on it to Saravane toward the northern edge of the Bolovens Plateau where fighting was going on between the communists and the Lao government forces under General Phasouk. I think I've mentioned General Phasouk before. He, to me, was the best of the ethnic Lao generals in the army.

LC: How do you spell his name, Joe?

JM: P-H-A-S-O-U-K. He was a very quiet-spoken man, but I think just about the most effective of the Lao generals. He was traveling with us on this trip that we were taking in his area. As a matter of fact, I had a great deal of interaction with him whenever I visited southern Laos. I had a very high regard for him. Unfortunately, he decided to stay on when the communists took over in 1975 and was taken to, quote "re-education camp," close quote, and died there, which I thought was a great loss for that small country.

LC: Do you remember how you learned that that had taken place?

JM: I can't remember. I must have learned from some of my American

colleagues who had served in Laos. That's the only way I could have learned about it, I think.

LC: Okay.

JM: Anyway, so when I saw this CIA report crossing my desk about six hundred Viet Cong sweeping across this road about the time we traveled east, I sort of thanked in retrospect that nothing had happened to us. Anyway, we got to Saravane and the province chief had a very nice luncheon for us there, as all Lao activities are of that sort, quite convivial, very enjoyable. Then after lunch the group was broken down by General Phasouk, actually, into two sub-groups, one group to take helicopters to Lao Ngam. That's two words, L-A-O, and second word N-G-A-M, which was a village right off the northern edge of the Bolovens Plateau, where in a recent fight he had managed to wrest that village from the communists. He wanted us to stop for a visit there. All the ladies were put on separate helicopters with some of the men and flown to the western edge of the Bolovens Plateau where there were several refugee villages which AID was assisting. So Ngon and I both went with General Phasouk to Lao Ngam. Interestingly, he insisted as soon as we got there that we be escorted by some of his armed soldiers because there were still snipers in the area. Since it had very recently been liberated it was still pretty bleak from the standpoint of what we could see there, but at least we were in a village that had just been taken back by the Lao government forces from the communists.

LC: Can you describe the village at all, Joe?

JM: Laura, I don't really remember. I don't think it was a very large village. It was a fairly brief visit in that area. We got back into our helicopters and I remember seeing from the helicopters on the northeastern edge of the Bolovens Plateau, three very high, very narrow and very high waterfalls at one of the most stupendous sights I think I've ever seen in my life as the water flowed off that plateau and down on to the plain. Then we flew on to join the other group that had stopped at the refugee villages on the western edge of the plateau and looked around there. Then we went back to Pakse for a second night. The next day, Ngon Sananikone, my minister friend, insisted that since we were in southern Laos that out of courtesy we should pay a visit to Boun Oum, Prince Boun Oum. Well, he was the head of the southern branch of Lao royalty and the

feudal head of southern and south-central Laos. His residential place of origin was in Champassak, the capital of Champassak Province, the southernmost one in Laos, part of which province lies to the west of the Mekong River. Most of it, I think is to the east of the river, but part of it, including the—again I should call it a village rather than a town—of Champassak was on the west. So Ngon insisted that we should go to Champassak to pay a courtesy call on Boun Oum and his brother, Boun Om. The two names, one is O-U-M and the other is O-M. I don't think they were twins. They were just brothers, I believe.

LC: Okay. Had you met them before, Joe?

JM: Excuse me?

LC: Had you met them before?

JM: Yes. The ambassador, Bill Sullivan, took me to call on Boun Oum in Laos, in Vientiane—excuse me—shortly after I arrived. Boun Oum, who had been briefly the prime minister in 1960, '61 and possibly—well, anyway, '61 and possibly part of '62 as the head of the rightist forces when at that time the neutralist forces were more or less allied with the communists and subsequently shifted over to alliance with the rightists. Souvanna Phouma became the prime minister.

LC: Yes.

JM: This was worked out at the Geneva Conference in Laos in 1962. Anyway, Boun Oum's only official title at the time I was in Laos was Inspector General of the Armed Forces. So Bill Sullivan took us to call on Boun Oum. Now Boun Oum was very interesting. He was a very burly, fairly tall for a Lao, very burly-looking fellow who had served in the French army where he had picked up a great deal of French slang which I found made him very difficult for me to understand his French because combined with the slang he also had a lisp. It proved quite difficult for me to decipher what he said a good deal of the time.

LC: Goodness.

JM: Then a second time I had met Boun Oum was when Bill Sullivan and I were in Khammouane Province, which is—well, it's in south-central Laos just north of Savannakhet Province. We traveled in that province. I think we met Boun Oum in the provincial capital and traveled with him for an afternoon. We saw how effective he was

with the villagers. Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister, was so princely that he never really got down to the level of the villagers whereas Boun Oum with his *bonhomie* got right down to their level very easily and mixed with the villagers very well. He was not a very effective prime minister, but he certainly had more political connection with the grassroots than Souvanna Phouma could ever dream of. So I'd had these two previous experiences with Boun Oum. Well, as I said, we, at Ngon's insistence, decided to spend the third day making this visit to Champassak. We drove about thirty kilometers south of Pakse and came to the rudimentary ferry crossing of the Mekong. While we were waiting for the ferry to arrive on the east side I remember we found an itinerant vendor of field corn, not sweet corn. We all ate field corn on the cob while we were waiting there. Then we got on this rudimentary ferry and crossed the Mekong. This was in the morning.

LC: Now, this is all your family going as well?

JM: Yeah, the whole family with Ngon with his three sons. His wife wasn't with him, however, on this trip with his three sons. So we crossed the Mekong and got to Champassak to find that Boun Oum wasn't there, but his brother Boun Om was. Boun Om was having a big dinner dance that evening, a Lao-type dinner dance, for the British ambassador who was leaving Laos. This was Boun Om's farewell for him and Boun Om insisted that we remain for the dinner dance. Well, to Ngon I objected strongly, saying that that means we'd have to cross the Mekong in this rudimentary ferry at night and then drive the thirty kilometers through territory through which the communists sometimes infiltrated back to Pakse. Ngon said, "No. Again, out of courtesy, we must stay for this dance." The house of course couldn't accommodate us. It had the British ambassador there and no hotel existed in Champassak. As a matter of fact, I don't think any hotel had ever even been dreamed of for Champassak, it was so small.

LC: I believe it.

JM: But anyway, we stayed on for that dinner dance, which was another delightful Lao activity of that sort. About ten o'clock, we left there, Ngon with his three sons and myself with Nonie and our three daughters, got to the ferry landing and got on this ferry which was really a very small raft, the only lights of which were some lanterns hanging up. The Mekong was then in full flood stage about two miles wide, about a mile wider than it usually is, and with lots of debris floating down it, including whole trees,

uprooted trees, any one of which if it hit our raft would upset us. Well, I really prayed for that voyage across the Mekong. Obviously we made it. I think I probably got down on my knees after we got to the east side, but we escaped. Here he was with three sons and I with my wife and three daughters and not only should our heads be turned inside out but our whole skulls for having done this. But again, in diplomatic life you have to accede to some things when your host country friends insist upon it if you're going to maintain good relations, which we had done. But we still had the thirty-kilometer drive. By that time it must have been eleven o'clock or later at night back into Pakse. I kept my fingers crossed until we managed to do that one successfully, as well.

LC: Any upset along the way?

JM: No. Fortunately, no.

LC: Other than your own, I mean.

JM: Yeah, none. I will say that my concern over the danger of communist activity in the area was not unfounded. Either shortly before or shortly thereafter when I was in my office in Vientiane one afternoon shortly after lunch I received a call from Tom Cole, the head of the Public Works Division who said the communists attacked one of my road camps up on the Bolovens Plateau last night, damaging a lot of the equipment and very seriously threatening and scaring the personnel there. So Tom and I immediately got onto an airplane to fly down there. When we got there we found that Phasouk had already ordered some of his troops into the area. They were present and the presence of those troops plus our visit—we couldn't do much except to try to bolster morale by appearing there. The two seemed to have reassured the personnel and the camp remained in activity. Communist thrusts were certainly not impossible in that area at all as this attack demonstrated.

LC: Joe, let me just ask you one question there. Can you describe the extent of the damage when you were down there? What did you learn about what the communist forces had been able to do?

JM: Laura, I can't remember precisely, but they obviously damaged some of the road construction equipment.

LC: How many folks did you have down there?

JM: Excuse me?

LC: How many employees did you have down there?

JM: I suppose there must have been one American there and the rest were third-country nationals. That is probably Thai, and quite a number of Lao employees. Again, I don't remember how many there were, but we were constructing roads in the plateau in order to tie the tribal communities there, with which both the AID mission and CIA worked closely, into the existing surface transportation system, just as we were doing off the eastern edge of the—excuse me—western edge of the plateau, tying those new refugee villages into the existing road system. So we had, through the Public Works Division, had quite a lot of activity in southern Laos at that stage as you can see.

LC: Sure.

JM: Laura, I think that pretty well sums up what I wanted to say about the road program and looking at the time maybe I think this pretty well completes our discussion of the development program as it was being carried out.

LC: Well, we'll take a break there.

JM: Next time we can move into cost-cutting and shifting of funds.

LC: Very good. Thank you, Joe.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [42] of [57]
Date: June 23, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-third of June 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking by telephone from his home in Nevada. Joe, thanks again for your time. Today I think we're going to talk a little bit about another aspect of your overarching goals for the AID mission.

Joseph Mendenhall: That's right. The third goal, which I have mentioned, is cost-cutting, aiming to hold the overall level of U.S. economic aid to Laos at fifty million dollars, which I thought was a sufficient overall level for that small country and shifting some of the funds from lower-priority or even wasteful spending, in my view, to higher-priority developmental spending and some additional uses that were inevitable, even though I didn't particularly like them, which I'll get into later during our talk.

LC: Very good.

JM: I'm reminded Laura—well, I'll say this. When I got to Laos I pretty soon got the impression that everybody was trying to take advantage of U.S. government money, Americans, Lao, Thai, Filipinos, what have you. Everybody was out for what he could get, which I suppose with longer life and longer perspective is not too surprising. When I look around today and see the cost which health has reached in the United States, absorbing fifteen percent of our GNP (gross national product), I feel that we had an affordable health system before the government got involved but as soon as the government began to get involved and expand its role in the health field, costs began to run a pace. There doesn't seem to be much sign that they're going to be brought under control. I think today everyone involved in health, doctors, hospitals, patients, insurers and what have you, all seek to take advantage of the government. Laura, to get a little closer to your home, to universities and colleges, I think the fact that tuition in recent years has expanded far faster in costs than inflation would justify derives in good part from the fact that the educational institutions look at the fact that the government is providing much in the way of grants and loans for tuition for students. They feel they

can get away with increasing these prices. Maybe I'm wrong in that respect but I think as soon as the government gets involved in any program the costs tend to expand and, unfortunately, astronomically all too often. So what I found in Laos I suppose is not too surprising, but I still worked on trying to bring it under control.

LC: Joe, let me just ask at the outset, had you been given an indication that you ought to try to make progress in this area?

JM: No. No. This was my own decision as director of the AID mission. No. I got no indication of that in Washington. I suppose I felt that in general Congress tried to hold the foreign aid level down. I think Congress still tries to hold the foreign aid level down, but I'm not sure Congress tries to hold other expenditures down very well. Foreign aid, because it doesn't have any real voting constituency for the members of Congress does tend to get cut but almost all other expenditures, as you know there's a great deal of talk these days about earmarks, indicative of the fact that for most domestic spending Congress finds it difficult to place real limits on it. So I didn't get any instructions to that effect from Washington when I went out there. This was my own decision after I got there. The first area of cost-cutting that I focused on quite early was our air transportation costs. As I have indicated, I found that air transportation within Laos was costing almost one-fifth of our total aid program. Out of the total economic aid program fifty million dollars was costing us about nine million dollars a year simply to move personnel and supplies around the country. That seemed to me an exorbitant use of public funds. So I began to concentrate on that quite early. There my concentration was on two aspects in particular. One was the cost per flying-hour, which we were paying to the two airlines, Air America and Continental. Our forty airplanes and twenty helicopters were on a flying-hour cost basis. I had an excellent controller in the mission who negotiated the annual contracts with these air companies. He was one of the four or five best employees among our five hundred Americans. He succeeded admirably in getting the cost per flying-hour down in these annual negotiations. I always took my hat off to him and regarded him extremely highly. I think I have also indicated that I found on arrival a proposal which would have greatly increased our air costs. That was to take on two C-130s, large transport planes, bought specifically for Laos by Continental Airlines and to be used on a flying-hour basis in our country. I think we

were to pay a minimum of thirty—excuse me. I've forgotten the number of flying hours per month, but I think the cost was one thousand dollars per flying-hour. I found there were only two airports in the country which could accommodate those planes because of their size. One was Vientiane and the other was the royal capital of Luang Prabang. [Fortunately] in negotiating with Continental for these airplanes, the mission had indicated they wanted a two-month's trial and that two month trial was in progress when I arrived. I very quickly decided at the end of the two months we would discontinue that to Continental's chagrin. I think eventually Continental did find another use for them in the Congo where there was a crisis in progress involving the U.S. government at that stage, but we certainly couldn't really use them effectively in Laos. I think one of the best decisions I made was that early one to get rid of those two C-130s. The other way in which my endeavor to get air costs down was to rigidly control the use of the aircraft for which we were paying by the hour. There the focus was particularly on the use of helicopters because helicopters were costing us four hundred dollars an hour. This was in terms of 1960s dollars. That may not sound like such a terrific figure today, but in the 1960s that I felt was a very high figure. It reflected the fact that helicopters require a great deal of maintenance. They are a very expensive method of transportation. When I see their extensive use today, not only by our military forces, but by police forces and others, I wonder how cost effective a lot of that use is today. But that's, I suppose, aside from the point of dealing with Laos in the 1960s. In any case, we had an air use control officer in the mission, a retired Air Force officer. He had been a lieutenant colonel by the name of Bill Sparks. So as soon as I arrived I got a hold of Bill and I said, "You're authorized"—he was assigned to the administrative section of the AID mission. I said, "You're authorized direct access to me in case of necessity. I also want you to attend our twice-a-week staff meetings." Normally those meetings were at the division chief level but I said, "Even though you're not a division chief I want you there so I can emphasize the importance I attach to your control of the use of the aircraft." So that continued throughout my stay there. I'm not sure that Bill Sparks, the man who held the job, ever needed to use access to me very often. We did talk from time to time, but I think the word very quickly got around the personnel of the mission that I thoroughly wanted reduced use of these aircraft. Sparks had my complete support

if he denied a use. That, I think, worked pretty effectively. Now I've also mentioned before that certain regions of Laos, important regions, were unfortunately accessible only by aircraft. So there were limits on the reduction and use. The northeast in the tribal Meo area where we and CIA operated extensively with the Meo in the fight against the communist Vietnamese and Lao, there were no roads whatsoever. So everything had to be flown into that area. The same thing was true of the northwestern part of Laos. Again, we could get there only by air. There were no surface means of communication.

LC: Right.

JM: The same thing was largely true of Luang Prabang, the royal capital, which was more or less directly north of Vientiane. The only surface means of transportation to Luang Prabang was during the summer monsoon season when the Mekong was higher than normal. We could get light draft boats up river from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Otherwise we could not even use river transport the rest of the year. I have also mentioned that we were in the process of reconstructing the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, but even after my three years that had by no means been completed. So that it still wasn't open to our use for transporting either personnel or cargo. So that was the way we went about reducing the air costs. I have mentioned before, we got them down over my three years there from nine million dollars a year to four-and-a-half million dollars a year, which was a fifty percent cut, which I thought was a quite credible result of this drive.

LC: I would say so, yes. Joe, who got upset in the course of this activity? I mean, certainly someone is going to feel the pinch from this kind of a pushing action.

JM: Well, I've already told you that Pierre Salinger, who had been President Kennedy's press chief and at that point was a vice president of Continental Airlines got so upset that on his second visit to Laos he wouldn't even get in touch with me at all even though we had entertained him for dinner during his first visit and despite the fact that he was a cousin of my wife's stepfather. He cut me totally cold during his second visit there. I also mentioned, I think that a later visit by the president of Continental, Bob Six, was handled quite differently by him. He was very, very cordial despite all the cuts we had imposed on Continental during the time I was there. We had excellent relations with him and his movie star wife during his visit to Laos, but not with Salinger.

I don't feel that there was—not too much in the way of complaints reached me about the restraints I imposed on this, but I'm sure there were farther down the line in personnel in the mission because I do remember one aspergent remark about me which my wife reported to me during the flood in Vientiane. This didn't relate to air travel, but it's relevant to the question you just posed. During the great flood of the Mekong in 1966 when Vientiane was under a very substantial amount of water for about three weeks, among other things we inoculated about eighty thousand people in Vientiane. This was done at a central point in the city. That particular point was above water. My wife used to help out every day there. One day she heard a lower-level employee of our Health Division complaining that he and others were being forced to use older needles that were evidently not as easy usable as new ones because of that bastard Mendenhall insisted the old ones be used before we start to use the new ones. He obviously wasn't aware that Nonie was there. There was considerable embarrassment among those who were aware that Nonie was there and she reported this to me later. So I guess that's probably an indication, Laura, of how some low-level employees felt about me with this cost cutting approach.

LC: Well, that probably means you were doing something right.

JM: I took it as a tribute rather than anything else. It didn't bother me at all.

LC: I think so. Joe, what about things on the Air America side of the house?

JM: Well, we cut them also. Air America was a CIA-founded airline, which operated in the commercial sense, I think, more or less independently. I don't know what it is, at something, what is some length, not hand's length. There's an expression there. We negotiated with them as though they were a commercial entity, not as—incidentally, we negotiated the hourly rates, not only for the economic aid mission but for our military aid program and also for CIA. So the rates that we were able to bring down also reduced the cost of air transportation within the country to both the military aid program as well as to CIA. We negotiated at arm's length. That's the expression I was searching for. We negotiated at arm's length there and we did reduce their rates as well.

LC: Just on the same basis as you did with Continental?

JM: That's right.

LC: You never had a visit from someone in the station?

JM: No. No complaints ever reached me, at any rate, from Air America about this, no.

LC: Joe, can you give a sense of the kinds of materials—and some of this will draw on what you've already said—but the kind of materials that were being moved by air transport around? You've talked about the inaccessibility of certain destinations, but what was being carried?

JM: Well, one thing that was moved around a great deal, particularly to the northeast, the Meo tribal area, was rice because we provided a great deal of support, we and CIA, to both the Meo troops fighting in that area and to the Meo civilians who by and large were the dependents of the troops. We had to fly all that rice into the northeast, which landed at the AID center called Sam Thong. Then some of it could be distributed by surface, but not a great deal of it within that area. Most of it had to be flown on to the points where it had to be used. A lot of it was air-dropped rather than air-landed. We had special personnel in the airplanes called kickers because they would kick out these bags of rice and drop them to the users at various points around the northeast. That was one of the main items that was being shipped to the northeast. I suppose we had to get some of the rice to Luang Prabang that way, too, during the season when the Mekong was not navigable. Any other materials that we needed to send, hospital supplies for example, educational supplies, these were the kinds of things. We also provided a bit of a protein diet for the Meo in the northeast. So, all these things had to be flown into the northeast. Though we didn't have to provide nearly as much in the way of support to the northwest whatever we had to get up there had to be flown, too, as well as what I've said to Luang Prabang.

LC: When you say protein diet, are we talking about something like dried fish or some other meat?

JM: Laura, I can't remember exactly what we were using for protein diet now. I'm not sure it was fish because I don't think those people on the mountaintops were accustomed to eating fish. It was some other kind of protein. I can remember discussions with my Public Health Division chief, Dr. Weldon, who insisted that these people needed a minimum of protein for their diet. I think he was right on that score.

We were providing something, but I cannot really identify exactly what it was.

LC: Joe, let me ask about the air use control officer. Would he have had the authority to inspect the load? In other words, if the AID mission is paying by the hour might some other stakeholders or elements of the American effort there try to get something onto one of the helicopters?

JM: That would undoubtedly happen. I think at times certain elements of the press in the United States accused the U.S. government airplanes of hauling opium from the northeast back to Vientiane. So I'm sure that he did inspect cargos from time to time. This would have been a grave embarrassment, of course. I think to the extent that opium was shipped by air from the northeast or even from the northwest because the northwest—part of it was called the Golden Triangle area of Burma, Thailand and Laos, which was a great area of opium production, as well.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: One of the people who was allegedly involved in the deal and that was General Ouan, who was the head of the Lao armed forces. I think to the extent that air was used for the transportation of opium around the country, it was the Lao armed forces planes and not those that were under the control of U.S. government agencies.

LC: Well, Joe, that brings up another interesting area. It's certainly not only the AID mission, but other elements and these include the government of Laos who had air assets. Do you know where flights were controlled from? Was there any kind of what we might recognize as flight control?

JM: On the part of the Lao for the use of their aircraft?

LC: Yeah. Or how was that integrated with the fact that there were aircraft flying for the U.S. AID mission? I mean, was there any kind of organization of air traffic or was it pretty much seat of the pants and everyone for themselves?

JM: Well, I suspect on the Lao—I can't give you a precise answer to that, Laura, but I suspect on the Lao side since General Ouan, the head of the armed forces, was heavily involved, what control existed was probably exerted by him. I suppose he had some of his personnel involved in this control in some manner. That was probably about the only control that existed, I would think. On the civilian side there was a Royal Air Laos company owned by the government, which operated flights to Saigon and

Bangkok and also operated to a limited degree within the country. That outfit had its own airplanes. I don't recall that we in the AID mission were involved in any way with Royal Air Laos. I don't think we furnished any assistance to them. If they got foreign assistance they must have gotten it from some other country. I've used Royal Air Laos, which was a pretty primitive airline. I remember one time I flew from Saigon to Vientiane. I can remember that live lobsters and live chickens were brought right into the passenger part of the airplane on strings. I remember also the first stop in Laos was at Pakse and I saw—this was, I think, before I was assigned to Laos. That's probably why I was still in Vietnam. I remember seeing all kinds of things being unloaded out of the hold, including huge console radios. So Royal Air Laos—I did have some experience with Royal Air Laos. Normally when we flew to Bangkok and if we didn't use one of our aircraft under the control of the mission, we flew on Thai Airways normally rather than Royal Air Laos.

LC: That sounds like a good choice.

JM: Exactly. Thai Airways has a very good reputation, or it certainly did at the time that I knew it. I might even mention one thing which speaks very highly for Thai Airways. I guess it was the flight that we were leaving Laos definitively that we took Thai Airways from Vientiane to Bangkok. I realized when I got to Hawaii that I had left my sunglasses—I had a very good pair of sunglasses—had slipped out of my jacket in the overhead compartment. I sent a message back to the AID employee we had in Bangkok who controlled the flow of air cargo from there and asked him to get in touch with Thai Airways to see whether they had found them. By golly, they had and I got them back.

LC: No kidding?

JM: How about that?

LC: That's pretty remarkable. Yeah, I have to say I'm surprised at that.

JM: Oh, I am, too. I think that speaks very highly of Thai Airways.

LC: Sure. Absolutely.

JM: Laura, while we're on this particular angle, I remember also when I guess when I was inspecting in Spain, inspecting embassies and consulates and we'll get to that much later in these interviews. One Saturday afternoon weekend I took a tour bus from

Madrid to Toledo, which was the old capital of Spain before Madrid, and to me a much more interesting city than Madrid. Seated behind me was a very attractive Filipino lady and I struck up a conversation with her and talked to her a lot both going and coming, twisting around in my seat. Then I realized as I got off the bus near the apartment where I was staying in Madrid I reached for my wallet and my wallet was gone. I did have enough Spanish change to take the subway down to the headquarters of this tour company. As I walked in I began to describe about my wallet and an employee of the group just reached into a cubbyhole behind him and pulled it out and said, "Is this yours?" I said, "Yes." So I got my wallet back.

LC: Goodness. That's unbelievable.

JM: How about those two instances? I've had others. I've had an experience in Holland on the railroad. I was buying a ticket in Amsterdam to go to The Hague. It was a rainy day and I put my umbrella in a little ledge underneath the ticket window. I realized when I got to The Hague that I had no umbrella any longer. When I got back to Amsterdam after my day in The Hague, I went to the lost and found and they gave me my umbrella. How about those three instances?

LC: That's really quite remarkable. I can't say I've had that kind of luck.

JM: I've had other occasions when I haven't, too, including here in America.

LC: Yes, absolutely. I had a laptop that went missing right in the lobby of one of the nicest hotels in Boston.

JM: Oh, no.

LC: It just was gone like that, and certainly no good Samaritan turned it in.

JM: I hope there weren't any Social Security numbers on it.

LC: No numbers on it, no.

JM: I just read before you telephoned a fifth instance where a laptop computer of a U.S. government agency has disappeared with that kind of information in it.

LC: Really? Well, it's frightening. Those stories are actually quite worrying in terms of our dependence on digital information. Joe, let me ask, if I can, another question about the airplanes and the issue. Let me just clarify that the aircraft—these were aircraft, those of Air America and Continental, that were not in any way owned, at least outright, at least by American government.

JM: Oh, no. Well, only to the extent that Air America was really, I suppose, a government corporation as it had been founded by CIA, but no, not in the sense in which you're asking the question. The aircraft were owned by Air America and Continental.

LC: Would it have been the case, Joe, that your cost reductions achieved down to four-and-a-half million dollars per year as an outlay, a cut of some fifty percent, was achieved against a background of increasing usage over the period of '65 to '68?

JM: Laura, I can't really answer that because I don't think I ever got any figures whether we increased usage. I would think we probably reduced the usage actually.

LC: Is that right?

JM: Yeah. But we reduced the number of flying hours that we used, I would think because of the kind of strict control of use of aircraft which I imposed. The AID program during my three years there did not expand in overall size. So I would think that we did not. I would think that we probably reduced the usage, although I don't have any figures to support that statement.

LC: Well, that's a very interesting observation because, of course, this is the period that most people thinking about it associate with the massive increase in American deployment into South Vietnam and increased activities in Laos, as well.

JM: Well, I think certainly on the part of the military that is true, but I'm talking specifically about the economic aid program. The use by CIA and the use of our military aid program I can't really address that because I have no specific knowledge.

LC: Interesting. Did you, Joe, have to personally get involved at any point in the negotiations over the annual contracts?

JM: No. I never did because the controller effectively handled those in a very efficient manner. He would stay in touch with me about his negotiations but I did not get involved directly myself.

LC: Very interesting. The access to northeastern and northwestern Laos, that really didn't change too much over the time you were there. Is that right?

JM: No. No. I wouldn't say that it did.

LC: Was there much in the way of AID mission work on improving landing strips? We've talked about the roads part of this, but with the heavy reliance on air travel I wondered about the condition of the landing strips.

JM: I think the landing strips were pretty well established by the time I got there. The only specific case, and I've mentioned this before in our talks, was when the main airstrip in northwestern Laos was swept away by the Mekong flood in 1966. It was used not only, of course, for the AID mission, but for the other programs, including CIA. I was told by the embassy that we needed to get that strip back into operation as quickly as we could. Tom Cole, the head of my Public Works Division, had an airstrip ready again for use within six weeks. Again, not a paved airstrip, but one that I've said before was jet capable because it had an incline in the middle so that when you landed you went uphill for part of the runway. When you took off you went downhill for part of the runway, but he did that within six weeks. That's the only time that I recall that we got involved in airstrips within the country. I think the others were well established by the time I got there.

LC: Joe, was the fact that Laos shared the very long border with North Vietnam, was that ever very much in your thinking during the time you were there? I know obviously you would think about the cross-border traffic of the North Vietnamese military with the Pathet Lao but did you, yourself, ever feel slightly vulnerable because of that?

JM: Yes, Laura. Certainly in the larger strategic sense I've pointed out how strongly I feel the U.S. made a major political and military strategy error in agreeing to the spurious neutralization of Laos in 1962 and never introducing American ground troops into southern Laos to cut the infiltration route—to cut or cut back as substantially as possible the infiltration route for troops and armed supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. I did not raise this question in view of the capacity in which I was serving in Laos. I do remember having a discussion with our defense attaché, Colonel Baldwin, who was quite gung-ho as far as the strategy being used in South Vietnam was concerned, which I thought could not accomplish its objective as long as the North could furnish reinforcements, replenishments down through the infiltration route in eastern Laos. Though I already held those views quite strongly from 1964 on, I didn't push them because I didn't think that that was my role. Plus the fact that I think I've said that my credibility had been somewhat adversely affected within the U.S. government by the fact that after the overthrow of Diem in Vietnam in '63, which I

thought was strongly advisable, that the political situation was so unstable for the two ensuing years that it didn't help my overall credibility. I knew that I had alienated a number of highly-placed people within the U.S. government because of the views I had strongly put forth on that issue. So I didn't push my views on this political-military strategy question except with our own American defense attaché in Laos. As far as personal concern with the communist control of eastern Laos, I think I may have mentioned that one time I was down in Savannakhet province. I think this was in 1967 or the summer of '67. I wanted to go to Kengkok east of there. I was in the plane with the only two people were the pilot—I think he was probably an Air America pilot—and myself. I was seated in the co-pilot seat, but I was busy working on the congressional presentation for our budget for the ensuing fiscal year. I wasn't paying much attention until I looked at my watch and noticed that we were thirty-five minutes out of Savannakhet. I think I've mentioned this, didn't I before?

LC: Go ahead and just continue if you want to.

JM: Anyway, we were thirty-five minutes out of Savannaket and I turned to the pilot who had never flown that route before and I had. I said, "I think we've got too far and if we go much farther we're going to be over the communist-controlled area of Laos. We risk being shot down." He said, "No. I think we have another ten minutes to fly to get there." So I insisted that he turn back and he did turn back and it took a good ten minutes to get back to Kengkok. So if we were not already over the communist-controlled area we were very close to it. So I sort of figured that I saved myself that time because the pilot didn't really know what he was doing. So there was a particular instance where, yes, I could have been endangered by the communist control of southern Laos. Aside from the eastern Laos corridor controlled by the communists there were other areas in the country that often were under communist control. We lost people, including people in airplanes from time to time. We lost an aircraft between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Say in the northwest one time. There were seven people in a Dornier, which was a short take-off and landing aircraft. They never did find them, as a matter of fact. They never found that aircraft or the seven people, including a senior International Voluntary Service fellow, a U.S. Information Service fellow who was in charge of their office in Luang Prabang. I don't think there were any direct AID mission employees. I'm sure

they were not on that airplane. I remember the chief of the U.S. Information Service in Vientiane decided after the reports came in that this airplane was missing and decided to take an airplane or get an airplane for his use to search for it. He searched in the northern part of Sayaboury Province and was actually shot at a few times while he was searching for this aircraft.

LC: Really?

JM: So this kind of thing did happen from time to time, the shooting down of our aircraft in the country.

LC: Joe, let me ask, back on the discussion about the Geneva Conference and the protocols that were signed, the treaty that was signed, did you, Joe, think between 1965 and 1968 when you were actually in Laos that what the United States was busy doing with other agencies, not USAID, in terms of supporting local anti-communist forces was probably all in all a good idea?

JM: Again, Laura, I think we've discussed this in part before. The major activity, the kind you just mentioned, was in northeastern Laos with the Meo who were very strongly supported by CIA. What was happening in that part of Laos during the three years I was there was that the Meo would advance against the communists in northeastern Laos during the wet season. Then during the dry season the communists would usually regain control of the areas that had been lost to the friendly Meo forces during the wet season. I guess it was in the spring of '68, which was just a few months before I was due to leave, I was getting reports from the AID regional representative in northeastern Laos, Pop Buell, the old retired Indiana farmer who was very close to General Vang Pao, the Meo commander, that because of the heavy casualties that the Meo had taken over the years, Vang Pao was very reluctant to mount the usual spring and summer offensive against the communists in that area because it hadn't really achieved anything of a permanent nature. It did tie down to some extent, but a very limited extent, North Vietnamese forces who might otherwise have been used in Southern Laos or in Vietnam—excuse me.

LC: Right.

JM: But the CIA chief, Shackley, said that all the reports he was getting from his representative up there were gung-ho to go with the usual spring offensive. We had a big

discussion of that at one of the daily country team meetings under the ambassador's chairmanship. Shackley and I went at each other fairly heavily on that. The ambassador decided that afternoon Shackley, myself and the number two in the embassy, Hurwitch, should fly up to the northeast and talk to Vang Pao personally in order to try to resolve what his views really were. As I think I've said before, when we got up there Vang Pao, for good reasons from his standpoint, equivocated. After all he was getting major support from both CIA and the AID mission and he didn't want to bite either hand that was feeding him. So it didn't resolve things very well at all. We went back with sort of an equivocal answer from Vang Pao, which didn't really resolve the thing. I left Laos shortly thereafter. I don't know what really happened during that summer, whether there was a spring offensive or not. I suspect there was, but I'm not sure.

LC: Joe, that's very interesting. I don't know that we talked in any depth about this and I'm not sure that you would care to, but how did you appraise Ted Shackley's work. You knew Bill Colby, you knew several of the folks in the Vietnam station and earlier on, but can you kind of compare him or set him in context?

JM: Well, yes, I'd be glad to give you my estimate of Ted Shackley.

LC: Sure.

JM: Shackley was a very vigorous, aggressive individual who was certainly out to try to achieve overall U.S. objectives. I had no quarrel with his basic purpose in what he was doing. I sometimes felt, as I've just indicated in this case and in another case, too, where I had a head to head with him, that what he was doing was not necessarily accomplishing very much, but was perhaps wasting both personnel and resources because of the limited accomplishment. So I did have some difference with how he was carrying things out. On the other hand, I certainly agreed with a lot of the things he was doing. I have, by and large, despite the differences I had with him in execution shall I say, I think by and large that Shackley was a very good CIA chief in Laos. I don't fault him in an overall way. I think I mentioned many years later when I was in retirement in Italy I got a message from a guy who was writing a biography of Shackley. Actually, I think it was the biography that was published on Shackley.

LC: I believe so. Yeah.

JM: Wanting me to give the kind of assessment that you have asked for, but I

could tell between the lines he really wanted me to provide ammunition by which he could attack Shackley. I just absolutely refused to engage in that with the author of this book because I didn't agree with what was obviously his general approach to Shackley.

LC: Right. That's one of the problems that people in your position will undoubtedly come across when you're asked to provide ammo for a line already drawn in the sand. It's a little difficult.

JM: For example, I had a lot of policy differences in Vietnam in and over Vietnam with Bill Colby, but I still have a great deal of respect for Bill. I think that overall he was one of the finest officials we've ever had in the U.S. government.

LC: Joe, just again to set this in context and because this is a question of great current interest was the agency, the CIA, was that the right agency to be running the operations that were underway as what we now call or what has been called the secret war?

JM: I think so, yes, Laura. At that stage I think so. I think it should have been CIA that should have operated this. Because of the Geneva Accords of '62 on Laos and the fact that the U.S. chose to follow the neutralization as far as ground forces were concerned, we could not have used the Defense Department for this kind of an operation in Laos at that point. There wasn't any alternative to CIA.

LC: Right. I mean, the U.S. couldn't use armed U.S. Army folks or U.S. Marines and retain the sort of fig leaf of the Geneva Conference.

JM: Exactly. Exactly. Even as I've told you, the military aid program, which was administered through the economic aid mission, the personnel who administered it in our mission were all genuinely retired military officers. They were not the so-called sheep-dipped variety of officer who still really retained his active duty status.

LC: Right. I think many of those folks are what we now call contractors.

JM: Right.

LC: I mean, now there's no question about the utility of such people with their experience now.

JM: Right. Yeah. These weren't contractors because they were specifically employed by AID at the behest of the Defense Department.

LC: Right, civilian employees of USAID. Well, shifting gears just a little bit, Joe, I wonder if you can talk a little bit about relations with Congress. Because the AID mission that you had charge of was so large it certainly would have been one of the ones that the Appropriations Committee and perhaps the Armed Services committees of both houses would have been very interested in. Can you talk a little bit about that?

JM: Laura, may we defer that discussion?

LC: Indeed.

JM: Because it is something I do plan to get into later, but after we finish dealing with the cost-cutting thing we perhaps may be able to raise that one.

LC: Okay.

JM: It should be some time later. The next area of cost-cutting, unless you have some more questions—

LC: Please go ahead.

JM: The next area concerns personnel, which was the other major area that I had to deal with as far as costs were concerned. As I have indicated, we had about five hundred direc- hire American personnel in the AID mission, which was a very substantial size, second biggest to the AID mission in Vietnam. However, I never reached the general conclusion during my three years in Laos that we really had too many Americans there. The reason being, that the Lao government was at such a low degree of capability that we really did much more than the normal AID mission in terms of assisting and advising. We often had to operate directly in various activities which are normally operated by the local government. Since we were involved in a war and this capability was so limited within the Lao government I never felt that I could engage in any very wide reduction of the U.S. personnel within Laos. I say this, Laura, having in mind a subsequent job I had after Laos, which we shall get into, where one of my main tasks was to reduce the number of people in the oversized Vietnam bureau of the AID agency in Washington, which I eventually succeeded in cutting in half. It's not that I object per se to reduction of American personnel, but I didn't think we could really do it to any great extent in Laos. Now this is not to say that all of our employees were first-rate people. We had duds as one will inevitably find in any mission of that size, some of whom I did get rid of and replace over the three years I was there, but this was not an

extensive part of what I did. I will say that the overall capability of the Americans in the AID mission stood up very well when one compared it with the quality of the U.N. aid personnel assigned to Laos. They were not nearly so numerous as we were, but with one or two very remarkable exceptions, the quality of the U.N. development personnel assigned to Laos was very low indeed. I didn't think they ever contributed anything to the country, again I say with one or two remarkable exceptions. One was a Frenchman who was employed by the U.N. to work with the Prosthesis Rehabilitation Center of the Lao government. He did a very effective job and I always took my hat off to him. I visited his operation one day and he certainly was fulfilling a very great need and doing it very effectively. So there were exceptions there, but even the chief of the U.N. development office in Laos, a retired Italian admiral, very nice gentleman, but in my view totally ineffectual. He never raised his voice in any way with the Lao government on any policy issue and didn't really conduct an operation that was contributing very much to Laos at all. So I'm afraid I have a pretty low opinion of the U.N. development activities based on my experience in Laos.

LC: Joe, could you provide a kind of pencil sketch of what their activities were and how they compared with those of the AID mission?

JM: Well, Laura, I can't do it in any detail because I don't remember the details, but their operations were pretty well scattered. They didn't concentrate except for this prosthesis rehabilitation operation. They didn't concentrate in any particular area as I recall.

LC: So they didn't have a focus to their—?

JM: They didn't seem to have a very good focus at all. There didn't seem to be any strategic concept whatsoever in the U.N. operation there, just a few scattered individuals here and there who were as I say very ineffectual. Now, Laura, while we're on this subject I'm going to mention another aspect of foreign aid activities which I found very interesting. This was a certain aspect of French aid operations, much of which I didn't have a very high opinion, but the French did have assigned to Laos certain expert personnel who, contrary to the Americans, were totally integrated into Lao ministries and in certain cases provided the really essential part of the work of those administrations. There was one in the Ministry of Finance, an old Frenchman who was a

financial expert with whom I'd became acquainted and I regarded his work very highly. I think I can say he regarded mine very highly because he used to encourage me with the financial pressures I was putting on the Lao government in connection with their budget. He was an excellent foreign expert employee. So there were some Frenchmen who were making a real contribution to that country and doing it, as I say, in a manner in which we never engaged in in Laos, to a degree under the pacification [work] of the CORDS program in Vietnam. We did do this to a considerable extent, particularly in the countryside, I think. That's what helped to contribute to the eventual success of the pacification program there, but in Laos we did not.

LC: Joe, can you give us a sense—

JM: As a matter of fact, I'll say that by and large the U.S. government never engages in what I call not assistance or advice but secondment, really seconding American or French personnel to departments or ministries that are foreign. We really do this very seldom.

LC: Right. Yes, I think that's accurate. It's very rare for you.

JM: I think the French do it more often, particularly in their ex-dependencies. For one thing, it gives them in some ways a much more profound way of influencing the policies of the government in which they're aiding than we have.

LC: Yes, and very inexpensively.

JM: That's right.

LC: It's very cost effective to just have a couple of very key people in the ministries of finance and interior and that sort of thing. The gentleman that you mentioned, did you have any sense of his background? Was he an employee of what we'll call for my purposes Foreign Service, but you might clear that up?

JM: No, I don't think he was Foreign Service. I think he may have come from—I'm not sure of this, Laura. I suspect he may have come from the Ministry of Finance, but perhaps he was employed directly by the French foreign aid agency or perhaps he had been placed on loan to that agency for the duration of his assignment to Laos. I think he had been in Laos quite a long time. So the turnover issue, which I think often enough influences the effectiveness of American personnel, in personnel I'm talking about.

LC: Absolutely. Did you develop any kind of social relationship with this fellow?

JM: I don't think we had a social relationship as I recall, Laura, but I do remember talking to him occasionally, particularly during the latter part of my stay there when he became better acquainted with my approach. I somehow learned about him. I'm not sure how. It may have been through one of our employees in the AID mission who spoke excellent French. Now this brings up another issue about the effectiveness of American AID personnel. Unfortunately, the great bulk of the AID personnel in Laos did not speak French. Since there was only one Lao who spoke English, this was a limitation on their effectiveness. We did have quite a number, employed quite a number of Thai interpreters because Thai is very close to Lao in the language structure. So our personnel down the line often had Thai interpreters in dealing with Lao officials. I noticed this not only in my travels with Lao officials around the countryside where I always took some of our AID personnel in particular divisions with me, as well as on social occasions when I would sit down and talk at length with lower-level Lao officials in technical ministries like agriculture whereas the agriculture division personnel of AID could not really engage in this kind of conversation or establish this kind of rapport. Communication, I think, is one of the most essential aspects of trying to develop influence with a foreign government.

LC: Joe, let me ask if I can about the—

JM: Laura, before I forget, just let me add—

LC: Sure. Yes.

JM: Sorry to interrupt you.

LC: No. That's fine.

JM: But just one thing more in that respect. That is that we did have quite a number of young Americans in the countryside, some of whom had served previous tours of a couple of years with the International Voluntary Service in Laos, some who were direct AID employees from the outset. Others were ex-IV, International Voluntary Service employees whom we'd taken into direct hire who learned Lao. That was of course a great step forward as far as operations in the countryside were concerned. We're dealing with the peasants, of course, even French would not be of any help.

The young people who spoke Lao could be very effective in the countryside.

LC: Did your daughters or Nonie or yourself pick up any Lao while you were there?

JM: Very, very little because we always used French with the Lao. The ones we were dealing with always spoke French.

LC: Yeah. I'm sure that's true.

JM: Sometimes I was in touch when I traveled with Lao officials in the countryside, in touch with villagers who obviously didn't speak any French. There I would have to let the Lao officials do the talking.

LC: Joe, one further question about the personnel, including the Thai interpreters that you mentioned. What was the procedure for vetting these people? Would there be any kind of security background?

JM: Laura, I'm not going to attempt to give you an answer to that question because I don't really know the answer. I see what you're driving at, but I don't really know the answer to that.

LC: Okay. That's fair enough.

JM: Perhaps I should have, but I didn't.

LC: No. Well, I'm sure someone else was looking out for it. I don't think that was actually your job, but I just wondered if you had any sense of that.

JM: No. I didn't really and don't even today.

LC: Okay. Well, thanks, Joe. Let's take a break there.

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I'm continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-first of July 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is as usual at home in Nevada. First of all, good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thanks for your time today. Joe, I think you have some ideas about the additional pieces that you'd like to add to the record.

JM: Yes. Laura, we were in the midst of discussing what I consider the third principal prong of my strategy as the AID mission director in Laos. The third prong was cost-cutting.

LC: Indeed.

JM: We'd already dealt with the reduction in air travel costs within the country within Laos and we were engaged in discussing personnel costs. We had dealt primarily in that realm last time with the American direct-hire personnel in the AID mission who numbered about five hundred. There was another group of Americans working for the mission called contract people. That presented some problems because the Washington headquarters of AID considered them unauthorized because they were not included in the personnel ceiling established by Washington for each AID mission around the world. So I was under considerable pressure from Washington to cut down and really to get rid of the contract personnel, who numbered as I recall—I wouldn't swear by this figure—around fifty when I arrived. I think we did get it down to around thirty. So there was some reduction. The context of this question was this: there were some categories of personnel for whom it was important to us to keep contracts open for. One was—as I've indicated we had upwards of a hundred International Voluntary Service volunteers operating in Laos, sort of a private Peace Corps type of operation, but funded by AID. These young people were generally under two-year contracts with International Voluntary Service. A number of them proved to be very useful individuals and some of them learned Lao, which also helped to increase their usefulness. A number of them on

the expiration of their two-year contracts with the International Voluntary Service were interested in coming on to the AID payroll. Now, if they had to go all the way back to Washington and go through the direct-hire process it really would be much more expensive for the government than for us to hire them right on the spot and begin to use them. The contract process would enable us to hire them immediately if they were interested on the expiration of their contracts with International Voluntary Service. Then we could go through the direct-hire process via paper route with Washington without sending them all the way back to Washington. This was useful for all concerned. A second group where contract personnel were useful to us was in areas of activity where AID did not normally engage. To give a pertinent example there, well drilling. I think that Laos was perhaps the only country in the world or certainly one of the few countries in which AID had personnel actually operating well-drilling equipment to expand access to water in the country. Since AID didn't have openings in other missions, certainly on any wide-scale basis for these people, it was much better for us to hire them on a contract basis rather than for AID to assume them in a direct-hire status. These two factors caused me to want to try to retain a certain number of contract personnel. Though AID Washington was putting considerable pressure on us they eventually relented when they found I was cutting costs in other areas and doing my utmost to keep unnecessary expenditures or lower priority expenditures down. So eventually that pressure relented and we were able to continue to engage some personnel [by] contracts outside our direct-hire authorized figure for Americans in the mission. That pretty well concludes the American personnel part of what I wanted to discuss. The perhaps more significant area was that of local personnel, that is the personnel locally hired by the mission, many of whom of course were Lao, but as I've indicated in previous discussions, we also had quite a number of what we called third-country nationals under contract, particularly Thai and Filipinos. In that area the assistant director for administration of the mission, Alex Mavro, it seemed to me this was concerning his sort of private preserve. I got reports that he would every once in a while have a big party at his house for the local and third-country national personnel with liquor flowing abundantly. I sort of looked askance at all of this. I thought this was an unusual way for an assistant director for administration to operate, to engage in this sort

of thing with the locals, the Lao and the third-country national personnel. The other thing that I noticed about Mavro, whenever I was holding review sessions with the individual divisions in the mission, when I would start questioning him on budget, personnel and so on, he almost always turned to his deputy to provide the answers. Well, that certainly didn't increase my confidence in him. It began increasingly to seem to me that he didn't really know what the answers were and always turned to his number two in the administration. Now what really led me deeply into this question of local personnel—and I'll use that to cover both Lao and the third-country nationals—was the question of funding them. We paid them in Lao kip, which was the Lao currency.

LC: Yes.

JM: We had to have sufficient kip to pay them. We had three sources for kip in order to pay these people. I'm going to deal with the first two initially.

LC: Okay.

JM: One was what we called the U.S. Import Program or for short USIP. There are always acronyms in the government, as you know. The U.S. Import Program and the second was the so-called Invisibles Program of Assistance to Lao. I'll discuss both of these. The U.S. Import Program, as I've indicated I think in other sessions, financed at a heavily subsidized rate the importation of certain essential commodities into Laos. The two principal ones which had been in effect for some years were rice and gasoline. These were imported under this import program at a rate which was only about half of the free market rate. Actually I think it was about 240 kip to a dollar, whereas the free market rate was about five hundred kip to a dollar. So you can see these two and certain essential commodities of lesser importance were very heavily subsidized. When I arrived in Laos the AID was in the process of removing rice from this subsidized list of imports, which would throw it into the free import list where importers would have to pay five hundred kip to get a dollar rather than 240 kip. This produced a rather strong reaction on the part of quite a number of Lao, particularly government employees because they had been able to buy rice at a pretty heavily subsidized rate before. Now they were going to have to pay more in terms of kip because rice was now being thrown on the open market rather than the restricted subsidized market.

LC: Presumably they're working from a fixed salary or we should assume so.

JM: Exactly. Right. Right. So there was a fairly strong reaction. It built up right at the time of my arrival because I think it was left to me to notify the Lao government of the decision that had been made AID Washington to remove rice.

LC: Terrific.

JM: I think there was very considerable justification for removing rice from the Subsidized Import Program list because it was subject to a certain number of abuses. One was that in view of the long land border between Laos and Thailand rice—and it was generally imported by AID from Thailand because it was a different kind of rice. Rice consumed in Laos was a different kind from that generally produced in the United States. It was glutinous rice rather than non-glutinous rice. Those who are not in the know on rice will not understand those terms very well, but it's a pretty different kind of rice which reacts quite differently when you cook it and tastes differently and so-on. Anyway, northeastern Thailand, where the people were closely related to the Lao, produced a lot of glutinous rice. That's where we generally bought it for the Lao market but if we bought it, if it was bought by AID and sold at the subsidized rate within Laos it meant that the price of rice in Laos to the Lao was much cheaper than it was to the Thai consumers. In view of this long land border there was considerable risk that the rice once imported from Laos would simply flow back across into Thailand where the Lao dealers could make more money in selling it to the Thai. So that was one area of considerable abuse that we were concerned about, the justification for the decision by AID to remove it from the list. The other was that we in effect were subsidizing the urban Lao consumer where consumption of rice was increasing because of the low price and raising their standard of living above that of the villagers in the countryside, the rural people, which widened the gap between city and rural people which is not really desirable in a political sense. Then there was also the possibility and perhaps the likelihood that AID's importing subsidized rice would decrease the incentive for Lao farmers to produce rice themselves because they wouldn't get as good a price for their own rice sold within their country if it had to compete with this subsidized rice imported from [Thailand]. There were good reasons for removing the rice from the list, but since this was one of the principal commodities removing it from the list meant that we were generating fewer kip, Lao money, through this program.

That was one of our principal sources for getting kip to pay our local currency [expenditure]. The other source, which I mentioned, was the so-called Invisibles Program which I also inherited as well as the U.S. Import Program. Every government and country has to spend a certain amount of money on so-called invisibles. They include such essential things in all countries and this partly justified the program of aid assistance in this realm for the Lao government including official travel abroad, Lao diplomatic missions abroad, educational travel and scholarships, medical assistance that needed to be procured abroad since there was no university in Laos. Certainly the hospitals were pretty primitive. So, all these could be justified as essential expenditures by the Lao government which didn't have enough foreign exchange to fund these. It could make allocations within the Lao budget in kip for them but then these kip had to be converted in to foreign exchange. When I arrived I found this program was costing about a million dollars a year. Most people today, of course, would regard this as a pretty insignificant amount of money in a government program. In the 1960s it amounted, as anybody should realize, to substantially more. I began to put pressure fairly early in my tenure there on reducing this because, again, it was one that was subject to abuse as you see because Lao government officials with family, friends, political supporters and so forth, could be tempted to make these awards for travel abroad and education available to these friends. Particularly if somebody else is financing it you can see the possibilities for abuse there.

LC: Sure.

JM: I had an annual session with the minister of finance about the total amount in the Invisibles Program and gradually was able to reduce it, not in any very substantial way, but to some degree. To the extent that I did reduce the dollar assistance in this program, that also decreased the amount of kip available to us because the Lao government would always pay us in kip at the 240 rate, not the five-hundred rate for the dollars made available through the Invisibles Program. In other words they would take the kip out of their budget and pay it over to us. The U.S. Import Program and the Invisibles were our two principle sources of Lao currency to finance the AID mission's local currency expenditures. But as we were cutting back on both of them that meant that the amount of kip available was decreasing to us.

LC: Can you give a rough estimate, Joe, of the percentage that you were losing?

JM: Well, it was a fair—I can't do it in percentage terms.

LC: Okay.

JM: I'll just have to do it in general terms. Elimination of rice from the import program represented a—since it was one of the two principal commodities financed through that program—meant that kip available were fairly substantially reduced. Now the third avenue for the AID mission to get kip to finance its local currency expenditures was through using dollars available to us under the AID program for direct purchase of kip from the central bank of Laos. When we did that then we would get five hundred kip to the dollar. These two programs as I've mentioned yielded only 240 kip to the dollar, but we would get five hundred. But it meant that if the local currency available under these two programs was declining that we would have to use more of our total AID mission dollar funds to buy kip. Since I was trying to hold down the overall dollar level of the AID program you can see why I was interested in going into our local currency expenditures, particularly for personnel.

LC: Combing through to see that every dollar spent or every kip spent was appropriate.

JM: Here's where I came into conflict with Alex Mavro, the assistant director for administration. As I've indicated, I never could get from him a precise figure as to what our local personnel strength was. I couldn't get a figure out from him. He was, I think, resisting because he thought I was going to impose a ceiling, which I obviously was going to do, a ceiling which I would hope to reduce over time, but I could never get it. Then I was in Washington, I think it was the summer of '67 on consultation with AID. I met with the assistant administrator of AID in Washington for administration, a fellow by the name of Bill Hall, who like myself was a Foreign Service officer on loan to the AID agency. Bill was subsequently our ambassador to Ethiopia after his stint with AID. I met with Bill there and told him about this problem. He said, "Well, do you want me to change your assistant director for administration?" I said, "Well, yes. Because here I am. I've been in Laos for well over a year or well over a year-and-a-half even and I've never been able to get a precise figure on our personnel strength." So he said, "If that's what you want that will be affected. That proved to be a pretty severe

blow for Alex Mavro because it occurred, I guess, shortly after I got back to Laos. He was shifted out of Laos and I think sent back to Thailand where he had worked in the AID mission there without any specific job.

LC: Really?

JM: I think this was completely unexpected on his part, but it certainly served my purpose because Bill Hall succeeded in sending to me the assistant director for administration from the AID mission in Pakistan, a fellow by the name of Harry Carr. I remember you asking me for his name one time when we were discussing this a bit before.

LC: Okay. There you are.

JM: Harry provided all the efficiency which I would never get out of Mavro. It was quite quickly that I knew just what the personnel strength was, local personnel strength. He was excellent on budget, a very capable officer who proved to be just what I wanted in that job.

LC: Was he an AID professional or an FSO?

JM: Yes, he was. I think he had been with AID for quite some time, a very good man. So that proved to be a wise decision and helped me to fulfill my purpose of maintaining some controls over what our requirements would be in terms of selling dollars for local currency to the central bank of Laos. So that was helpful on this score. Now in another area of cost cutting—unless you have some more questions about the personnel for me.

LC: No. Go ahead, Joe.

JM: Another area of cost cutting that I got into—I guess this was during the third year I was in Laos—was cost of transportation of AID-financed commodities which had to move from the port of Bangkok into Laos. Laos is a landlocked country, has a long frontier with Thailand, no longer had any routes of communication with Vietnam despite its borders with Vietnam on the other side. So all commodities financed by AID had to come through Thailand to be shipped by rail from the port of Bangkok to the Thai town of Nong Khai, which is on the Thai side of the Mekong River about twenty kilometers south of Vientiane from where they were shifted into trucks moved by ferry across the river and then by road into Laos into Vientiane. That was the transportation

system. The AID mission in Laos actually had a full-time officer stationed permanently in Bangkok to make sure that our commodities moved through Thailand to Laos without delay, without being diverted in any manner and to get them to us in whole and without diversion as much as possible. He proved to be one of the four or five best employees that I had in the mission, too. Looking at him one wouldn't have thought so. He was a huge fat guy always smoking a big cigar, married to a Thai lady, but he really carried out his job just as Harry Carr did in the most efficient manner that one could ask for. But we came to feel as the Lao did that on the Thai side the agency through which we had to operate to transport the commodities through Thailand called the Express Transport Bureau, ETB of Thailand, an organization in which Thai politicians and generals were the principal stockholders was really gouging us. Therefore I decided we ought to put some pressure on the Thai to lower their charges. We had support from the Lao government, but it wasn't about to put itself in any exposed position against its much stronger neighbor. So they let us carry the ball, but they were supporting us behind the scenes. We began to put considerable pressure on the Express Transport Bureau of Thailand to reduce their charges.

LC: Okay.

JM: Pretty soon we began to get cables from the embassy in Bangkok expressing concern and opposition to the pressure we were putting on this Thai agency. They got stronger. The guy who was leading this campaign in the embassy in Bangkok was the chief of the economic section. He had the title of minister. He was minister for economic affairs, a fellow who I think was in his last assignment in the Foreign Service, I think somewhat bitter that he hadn't gone on to become an ambassador. But he was the one conducting this campaign, counter-pressure against us for these reduction of transport costs. He eventually came through in an embassy cable addressed to Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, suggesting that he look personally into my association with this drive, saying that he thought that the Lao side of the transportation, the twenty kilometers just across the Mekong River to Vientiane, saying that they charged far more per ton mile than the Thai side. That's obvious. If you're engaging in a short haul you charge more per ton mile than if you're engaging in a long haul.

LC: It's also not a rail line, as you pointed out earlier.

JM: Excuse me?

LC: It's not a rail link between Nong Khai.

JM: Yes. The goods had to be unloaded from the Thai side, put on trucks, ferried across the river and then on into Vientiane. So the cost obviously was greater there. I think that this fellow in the embassy in Bangkok knew that I had close official and personal relations with Ngon Sananikone, the minister of public works and of economic affairs. It was a member of—a fellow who had married into the Sananikone family who operated the Lao private agency which provided the transport there. He inferred and implied in this cable to Bill that he thought I might be personally involved in this gouging. Well, this really set off Bill Sullivan's temper and he had a pretty strong one. He really fired back a cable which blasted this guy out of existence. We never really heard more about it from the—and these cables were repeated to Washington. So you can see that the State Department and AID were both thoroughly informed about the feud between the mission in Laos and the mission in Thailand. Anyway, as far as the Lao agency was concerned, I was also putting some pressure on them to reduce their charges even before we got this cable from Bangkok. So it didn't really worry me very much at all.

LC: It wasn't going to stand up.

JM: No, it wasn't. To assess the pressure we were putting on both the Thai and the Lao sides, we did get some cost reduction. I suspect we didn't get enough, but at least we made some progress on both sides and managed to save some money there. There was another area which came to my attention from a cost standpoint during this time. That was the charges by the Lao water administration to AID for water furnished to our mission, which was rather small of course, but water furnished to all the housing provided for AID American employees. We had about six kilometers outside Vientiane, what amounted in some ways to an American enclave where most of the AID American personnel in the mission lived. So that was a fairly substantial amount of water involved there. It was reported to me that AID was being charged much more for water than Lao consumers were. Now the Lao water administration was being run by a son of the Lao prime minister. His name was Panya Souvanna Phouma. He was one of the two sons of the prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, who had recently come back from a session at

Harvard where he had been doing some graduate work. He had been put in charge by his father of the water administration. I knew him and we got in touch with him. He defended the fact that he was charging AID more than a lot of Lao consumers because he said in order to make his agency operate on a cost effective basis he had to charge according to what the consumer could pay. His water system had been improved under another aid project not financed by the U.S. government, but by some other aid donor. He indicated, "I'm trying to make this operate with some profit so we can maintain it. I have to charge in effect what the traffic will bear." That was one factor, but I think he also charged according to willingness to pay. Not just what one could pay, but willingness to pay. I think quite a number of his consumers, including some Lao government agencies which did have budgetary funds to pay him, weren't paying at all. So I was putting considerable pressure on him to get our rates down. I think that was still ongoing when I left. I don't know what finally came out of that. It was not a huge sum of money obviously but it was one means of trying to reduce our Lao kip expenditures. Laura, I might mention in connection with the pressure on the Thai agency to reduce its charges to us and the reaction of the embassy in Bangkok, I think I talked earlier about a similar problem I had with our embassy in Manila over the pressure I was putting on Operation Brotherhood, a Filipino organization which furnished doctors and nurses to various rudimentary hospitals we had around Laos, to reduce their overhead charges in the Philippines. The strong reaction I got out of the embassy in Manila over that, these two were sort of similar where I managed to stir up quite strong reaction in two embassies in the Far East with cables flying back and forth with copies to Washington. So I guess I wasn't an extremely popular person with all the pressure I was putting on them about cutting costs.

LC: Two things. The fact that Ambassador Sullivan came right in behind you and—

JM: Oh, he gave me complete support.

LC: Yeah. That's very helpful and also I think very telling about your relationship with him.

JM: Oh, yes. It was he who had chosen me personally to come there. We were old, old friends who had also worked together in Washington, as I had indicated

earlier.

LC: He was known to have—or it has been reported that he had a terrific temper if provoked.

JM: He had a terrific temper and Bill had a tremendous amount of courage, too. He fought the battles that he thought should be fought very strongly. I don't know whether I've indicated this in previous talks about him.

LC: No. I don't think so.

JM: Much more significant than what he did in Laos in the connections I've been discussing was what he did in Iran at the time of the revolution in 1979. Bill had been ambassador to Iran, I guess, for about three years when the Khomeini revolution broke out or began to get underway. I'll put it that way. Brzezinski, the national security advisor to President Carter in Washington, decided that Bill was not supporting the shah sufficiently against this revolutionary operation and got a general, I think a four-star American general, assigned from Europe to Iran to carry out what Brzezinski thought should be the policy. Well, Bill fought this terrifically and he knew it was a Brzezinski operation. He let fly in no uncertain terms in his cables to Washington of what he thought of Brzezinski. Actually, I think Bill was quite right. Brzezinski's point was we need to provide support to the generals in the Iranian armed forces who are opposed to Khomeini and his revolution. That's the reason he got an American military man in there. If those generals had felt that there was any real opportunity to oppose that revolution successfully they certainly would have done so because it was their own lives which were at stake if the revolution succeeded.

LC: Yes.

JM: So Bill, I think, was absolutely right on this score and this was a case where a high Washington official with a great deal of prestige, foreign affairs background prestige, but without any actual service abroad didn't really know enough about how situations of this kind operate in countries which are subject to *coup d'états* or revolution and intervened on the wrong side. Certainly we didn't want the Khomeini revolution to succeed, but there was no real opportunity to oppose it successfully. Therefore, trying to put that kind of pressure on the generals in the Iranian armed forces who were in effect on our side, it couldn't succeed in accomplishing anything. As a result of the cables Bill

sent back to Washington, President Carter immediately wanted to—and he was supporting Brzezinski—immediately wanted to remove Sullivan as ambassador to Iran, but he was defended by Cyrus Vance, the secretary of state, who managed to convince Carter that he shouldn't remove Sullivan at that time. Actually, it wasn't too long later until Sullivan himself decided to retire. On that score, while I'm there I might mention another interesting thing, Laura.

LC: Sure.

JM: Sullivan, after the revolutionaries had taken over, the Khomeini revolutionaries, was himself seized by the radical Iranian Revolutionary Guards and held briefly, but managed through his own pressure and ability to talk, to talk himself into being released. This was a prelude to the subsequent seizure of our embassy after Sullivan left, by the revolutionary guards and the long hostage period in Iranian and American relations which was resolved only the day Reagan became president when the Iranian government, because they felt that Reagan would put much more pressure on them than Carter had ever done, released the hostages the very day Reagan was inaugurated. That's something Americans should remember. That provides an extremely important lesson as to the credibility of American resort to pressure and force. Credibility to me, as I think I've indicated in previous conversations with you, is an extremely important thing if you're going to deter war with your enemy.

LC: Joe, several things pop up and I don't know if you care to comment on them. Did you ever speak with Ambassador Sullivan after he came back from Iran and after this episode where he was kidnapped?

JM: Oh, yeah. He retired after he resigned as ambassador to Iran. I think Vance wanted to get him another appointment as ambassador or tried to talk Carter into it, but Sullivan decided that he would retire. I think took a job with—I think it was the—well, I don't remember the name but a private organization in New York. Then after he was with them for several years actually retired to his retirement home that he had built in Cuernavaca in Mexico. But he and I stayed in touch. I visited him in New York. He visited us in Italy where I was retired. We visited him also in Mexico and we continue to stay in touch. Unfortunately he had a very serious stroke a few years ago and has never recovered from it. He is still alive, but he hasn't been able to talk since

that time unfortunately.

LC: Yes, it's very sad. I wonder whether he mentioned to you or talked to you about that period when he was held.

JM: Yeah, he talked to me. He also wrote a book about it.

LC: Yes. I've seen the book. I'm sure you have also. I wonder if there's anything that particularly stands out in your mind about what he told you himself or parts of the book?

JM: Nothing that would really add to what was in the book where I think Bill was very frank in his discussion of the episode I've just talked about here with Brzezinski and, in effect, with the president.

LC: The episode as you describe it very much brings to mind your own discussion of the pressures placed on generals to support Ngo Dinh Diem in the early 1960s and, of course, some of the backfire that occurs when attempts at strategy without realizing that these fellows have their own calculus and their own way to figure out what's in their best interests because they are in the situation. An unsuccessful coup attempt has the worst possible outcomes for them.

JM: Laura, this discussion also brings to mind another episode which I may have discussed earlier. I probably did, but I can't really remember whether I have or not, and that was the question of how the U.S. officially reacts in a *coup-d'-état* situation against a government we have been supporting mounted by military officers who also agree with our policy, just as the government in power has, what position we take during that coup attempt. This came up in Vietnam as I know I indicated to you during the first coup attempt against Diem when Diem telephoned Ambassador Durbrow in the midst of the coup activity asking for a statement of support by him. I urged Durbrow to hedge because we didn't know which group was going to come out. Both were favorable as far as American policy was concerned. I felt that we shouldn't alienate the group mounting the coup in case they were successful. We'd have to work with them.

LC: Yes.

JM: As I think I have also indicated, that permanently soured Diem on Durbrow during his succeeding few months in Vietnam as ambassador. He wasn't able to accomplish anything with Diem. My position on this at this time is, I think, debatable,

partly for that reason and also because of what Marshall Green told me about the quandary he found himself in when the military mounted a coup against Syngman Rhee in Korea. Green, who was the number two in the embassy, happened to be in charge as chargé. The ambassador was out of the country at the time of this coup attempt. Green told me that he tried to talk General Park, I think it was, who mounted the coup in Korea out of continuing with his coup attempt against Syngman Rhee who had been president of Korea ever since the end of World War II. I think this coup was in 1960. He tried to talk Park out of the coup. Obviously he didn't succeed because Park was successful in ousting Syngman Rhee and taking over, which I think in the long run was much more beneficial to our interests. He said General Park later called him in and discussed this and said, "In a way I'm glad you did this because this means that if some general tries to mount a coup against me you're going to try to maintain me in office." I don't know if I mentioned that point when we discussed it.

LC: No. I don't think you did.

JM: You know, the position I took in Vietnam and the different position that Green took in Korea can both be defended in a sense. It's hard to say which should prevail. I suppose it has to be a decision in each individual circumstance. When you're in a coup attempt you don't know which side is going to prevail.

LC: Right. You may not know it for quite some time.

JM: You don't know it until it's been settled.

LC: Exactly, which may not be within the day, within twenty-four hours.

JM: No. That's right. It may not be at all. Anyway, this is one of those dilemmas a diplomat can face. Usually you've got to make a decision right on the spot. You don't have time to cable Washington to ask for instructions.

LC: That's right. I would like to have Marshall Green be the one, or yourself, making the decision, though. I think those are two folks I would feel pretty confident in their read of the situation.

JM: As I think I've indicated I have a high regard for Green just as I do for Sullivan

LC: Absolutely.

JM: A number of my colleagues I don't have a similar high regard for, but these two I

do. In other words, in the Foreign Service we had some extremely valuable people as well as some who I feel were relatively useless.

LC: I'm sure that's true. It would be true in any bureaucracy, the Foreign Service having the same problems as many big organizations. Joe, there's one thing I want to ask, if you don't mind, about the episode involving the Express Transport Bureau and the fellow in Bangkok who wanted to kind of smear you, it sounds like.

JM: Right. Oh, yes. That really set Sullivan off.

LC: You mentioned that part of what this fellow in Bangkok was trying to do was to insinuate that because of your connection with Ngon Sananikone you were implicated because his family was involved in the Nong Khai-to-Vientiane part of the transport.

JM: Right.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about that family link?

JM: Yes. He had married a sister of Ngon Sananikone. So there was a pretty close link there.

LC: Okay, the fellow who was running that transport?

JM: That's right. The son of this fellow and Ngon's sister, Manarek Luangkhot, was the only Lao who had gone to an American university and graduated from it and whose English was perfect, whom I've mentioned several times as being a very effective link in our dealings with the Ministry of Public Works where he was operating. Ngon was the minister there. We were closely involved with that family, but we certainly didn't have any monetary interest whatsoever.

LC: Right. Just for those who—I'm sure everyone listening to this will get it but the suggestion was clearly that—the implication was that Ambassador Sullivan—

JM: That I was personally benefiting financially.

LC: Yeah. That you'd be getting a kickback here somewhere, right. Well, it's kind of funny to think about it now but I'm sure any time someone makes that kind of suggestion you worry just that little bit—

JM: Oh, sure.

LC: That someone might take it seriously.

JM: Oh, yes, it certainly happens in Washington often enough.

LC: Indeed, indeed. Let's take a break there, Joe.

JM: Okay.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [44] of [57]
Date: August 4, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I'm continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the fourth of August 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking as usual from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, there was at least one additional piece I think that you wanted to add to our discussion from our previous session.

JM: That's right, Laura. I want to put it in context. We've been talking about the third prong of my strategy as I saw it for the AID program in Laos, which was cost-cutting. We talked last time about the United States Import Program, which provided funds for importing certain basic staple commodities into Laos at a highly subsidized exchange rate of 240 kip, the Lao currency, to the dollar. As I indicated the last time, rice, one of the two biggest products on that list, was removed from it just about the time that I arrived in Laos. I got a good deal of the fallout because it fell to me to notify the Lao government that it was being removed by Washington from the authorized list of commodities under this Subsidized Import Program. The thing I want to bring in this morning was that the remaining big item—there were a number of smaller items—but the remaining big item was gasoline under the Subsidized Import Program. I proposed in late winter or early spring of 1968 that that item be removed, too, in order to hold down our AID program expenditures in Laos. That, of course, produced a strong reaction from the Lao government. One of the reasons, an important reason, that I felt that it should be removed is that the subsidization of gasoline imports really magnified the difference in standard of living between the urban areas of Laos and the rural village areas because there were no automotive vehicles in the village areas. They were too poor for them. So it was the urban areas and particularly government employees who tended to benefit primarily from this subsidized gasoline. Therefore the gulf between the standard of living between the urban and rural areas was increasing as a result of this. There were a number of reasons that I felt the product should be removed. I'll bring in another

important reason in a few minutes in connection with the major theme I wanted to develop today.

LC: Very good.

JM: Which was the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund, FEOF, by government acronym. We always referred to it as FEOF. This was a fund which provided foreign exchange to meet all and any demands in Laos for it. In other words, if one had the kip to buy dollars or other currencies through this fund, anybody who wanted to import could, but it was at a rate that was more than double the subsidized rate. It was five hundred kip to the dollar, which of course we tended to hold down demand for foreign exchange and thus provided some means of control for the demand for dollars. There were five countries which contributed foreign exchange for this fund: the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Japan, and France. Now the first four made real contributions to it. The French, as often, adopted a Gallic maneuver, which meant in the end the French really made no contribution whatsoever to it. They would provide some foreign exchange for the fund, but they would insist also on getting the kip equivalent out of the Lao government to finance the expenditures of the French government in Laos. So in the end they were making no real contribution whatsoever because they spent in kip the equivalent of what they contributed in francs, a real Gallic maneuver, which reminds me of others that they have pulled over the years, which is one of the reasons I always look a bit askance at French government positions when we have to deal with them. As I indicated, this program provided foreign exchange for any demand in kip at this rate of five hundred kip to a dollar. The fund had been established some years before my arrival and at the time of its establishment was regarded as a great step forward in dealing with Laos because prior to that time the exchange rate had been much lower. We saw the demands under our AID program constantly increasing because of that low exchange rate. We finally got the Lao to agree to this much higher exchange rate with this fund meeting all demands for kip, but as I say, at the much higher rate as I have indicated. This was fine in a way, but there was also an Achilles heel to this plan. That was the biggest generator of kip in Laos was the Lao government because it was the biggest employer of all in the country. Whatever it decided its budget deficit would be determined the overall demand through kip for the foreign exchange in FEOF. So that

this in a sense was like giving somebody else access to your checking account. If he felt he wanted to generate some demand for the dollars you would have to meet it. This did indeed represent the source of what turned into the biggest problem that I had during my whole three years in Laos, the biggest battle I had, and that was over this Foreign Exchange Operations Fund. I'll explain how this problem developed. The biggest single source of revenue for the Lao government, tax revenue for its budget, was its export tax on gold. This was an anomalous thing because the Lao didn't produce a single gram of gold, but it was big export tax, the major source of revenue for the government on this commodity. This situation arose because at that time the United States, which held the biggest gold supply in the world, maintained a rate of thirty-five dollars for an ounce of gold. So that if we had to ship gold abroad for any reason it was done on the basis of thirty-five dollars. Gold was not permitted to be sold by the United States to private people within the States or abroad.

LC: Right. This was the time before the floating exchange rate of the dollar.

JM: Exactly. This was when we were—we went off the gold standard in the depression in the 1930s, but we still maintained the gold price and had ever since the 1930s at thirty-five dollars to an ounce, despite the inflation that developed.

LC: Yes.

JM: This began to create real problems for the United States because our own balance of payments to foreigners was running in increasing deficit and therefore often had to be met by gold from our supply in Fort Knox. This gave rise to increasing congressional criticism of the fact that we were holding the gold price down and more of it was pouring out of Fort Knox. So that all of a sudden in the spring of '68, I think it was in February or March, I think it was—the executive branch of the government under President Johnson decided to change the value of gold for most purposes to double the price of thirty-five dollars. This swept the basis for the Lao export tax on gold out of existence because no longer could importers in Laos—they had to import the gold from abroad. They could no longer get it at the cheap price they had been getting it, not directly from the United States but countries to which the United States was obliged to ship gold because of its balance of payments deficit. They would no longer get it at the cheap price and therefore could no longer sell it at a big profit which the Lao government could tax

as the biggest single basis for its revenue. Though the United States adoption of the new price for gold was certainly to the overall advantage of our country, as far as the AID program was concerned in Laos and as far as the Lao government was concerned it was a real blow. We were thoroughly stunned by it because it meant that the Lao government suddenly faced a big shortfall in financing its budgetary deficit. So I could foresee that the Lao government would pretty soon be asking for additional contributions to the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund in order to generate this shortfall in kip to finance its budgetary deficit. Because the second purpose of this stabilization fund, aside from its balance of payments purpose was to finance the budgetary deficit because the kip equivalent of the contributions by the five foreign countries except for France went to finance the budgetary deficit of the central bank. When it sold the foreign exchange to the people seeking it in Laos would get kip for it and then it could use these kip to turn over to the Lao government to finance its budgetary deficit. So I immediately foresaw a big demand on the part of the Lao government for additional foreign exchange to go in the stabilization fund since the Lao government and the other donors tended always to look to the United States as the residual donor. That is, if any additional demands for foreign exchange came up they expected the United States to meet it. This was one of the reasons that I was proposing that the gasoline be eliminated from the subsidized import program so that the dollars that went for that purpose could be used if necessary to help meet this demand for the additional foreign exchange for the stabilization fund. I immediately began to put pressure on the Lao government to do something about the elimination of this important source of revenue either by reducing expenditures or by finding new sources of revenue through either new taxes or through adjustments in existing taxes. Now, of course, I had had problems the previous two years with the Lao government over this question of the Lao budgetary deficit. We had managed to settle those amicably when there was no real crisis, but with this elimination of the export tax in gold, this was a real crisis. Pretty soon I found because of the pressure I was putting on the Lao government the minister of finance with whom I had worked extremely closely throughout the time I was there would no longer speak to me.

LC: Was that Ngon Sananikone at this time?

JM: No. This was—no. It wasn't Ngon Sananikone.

LC: Who was it?

JM: It was Sisouk na Champassak.

LC: Oh, Champassak. Mm-hmm.

JM: Yeah. Who tended to be looked at as the future successor of Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister. There was no official choice of him as the successor, but most foreigners as well as informed Lao tended to look to him as the likely successor. I had worked extremely closely with him as the sort of the overall manager of the AID program on the Lao side for the three years I had been there. As you see how personal relations suddenly deteriorate quite drastically. So this was the big problem that developed, the biggest problem that I had that suddenly thrust itself forward. It had, as I shall go into not in this session but later, it had some real personal consequences as far as I was concerned, which I did not foresee at the time.

LC: Okay.

JM: We'll go into that later, but it was a great problem between our two governments and I was right in the middle of it.

LC: Joe, before we go any further I think it might be useful just if you can outline how long the Lao government had been using the import and then re-export of gold to finance its budget. You said it was the largest source of revenue. Do you have a sense of how much it was making or even a percentage?

JM: No. I can't give it to you in any figures, but I know it was the largest single source of revenue for the government. It had been going on for a number of years.

LC: So long, long before—

JM: I don't know. It was back well before my time when this began to develop. I suppose it was sometime in the 1950s when Laos emerged from French control that this began to develop as a major source of revenue in Laos, its real independence.

LC: Where was the gold coming from? Was it Burma or do we know?

JM: I'm not sure I can even answer that. I think there were a number of countries around the world, governments which did sell gold to private people who were willing to pay for it. Ever since, the official price had been thirty-five dollars and it had been doubled in that demand. That demand suddenly was drastically lower as you can see. It had been at thirty-five dollars, had been a very important trade because gold was in

high demand in the private sector in countries such as India for hording, for jewelry, for private savings. In countries where people historically had not had much trust in either the government or the banking system, gold tended to be, as I know you're aware, a major source of trying to provide for the future. Even today one can see how the price of gold oscillates with expectations of what the exchange rate for the dollar is going to be and what inflation may be around the world. So in a sense it's not all that different today than it was then. There was I think probably more justification then than even now for the gold to be looked at as a reservoir for hedging against the future.

LC: Yes. It's a safety net and is seen that way, particularly in what we used to call the Third World.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, that's exactly right. Please go ahead then, Joe, and tell us more about the fund if you can.

JM: Well, as I say, this rose to be the big problem. As this problem was developing, Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, decided to go to the United States for both consultation on official matters and I think for something related to his health. I think he left Laos sometime in early May.

LC: Of '68?

JM: '68, yes. This was not a definitive departure. He was just going to Washington in the U.S. for a few weeks and then would return.

LC: Sure.

JM: As this was developing I got a letter from him from Washington saying that he was supporting my position in Washington, which was good of course. However, as subsequent developments occurred, where I really needed him was as ambassador in Laos even more than in Washington and I'll explain that in a moment.

LC: Okay.

JM: The final blow, the final crisis as far as I was concerned arose in early June or late May I guess it was, just before I was going to leave Laos myself on home leave. I'd been in Laos for three years and I was slated for home leave that summer. This arose for this reason. The International Monetary Fund, the IMF, sent to debtor companies around the world, usually I think once a year or once every two years, I've forgotten

which, so-called teams for consultations on the financial situation. In May of ’68 a team of three fairly high-ranking IMF officials came to Laos to look at the financial situation, but contrary to what the IMF usually did when there was a crisis for financial reasons in one of these countries, the IMF, as it has often been criticized for, it began to put a lot of pressure on that government to take measures to try to deal effectively with this financial crisis so as to keep down the demands for loans from the IMF. However, in the case of Laos, Laos was such a poor debtor country that the IMF never envisaged making any loans to Laos, but it did send its consultation group there. Therefore resources to the IMF were not an issue. This meant that this group was not prepared to put any real pressure on the Lao government. When the group was finishing its mission, it, as usual, held a big session with the Lao government, with the Lao prime minister and the leading ministers of the government, and with the five foreign contributors to the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund. I remember that day very well. It was held in the prime minister’s office. The IMF, of course, group proved to be a wimp. It didn’t put any pressure on the Lao government. When the time came at this meeting for the ambassadors from the five contributors to FEOF spoke, none of them would put any pressure on the government—four ambassadors I should say, plus the U.S. representative was Bob Hurwich. He was the number two in our embassy and therefore the *charge d’affaires* in charge of the embassy during Bill Sullivan’s absence in Washington. He didn’t speak up with any pressure. So it left it to me to try to put some real pressure on the Lao government because I could see this meeting as being the crucial one to put some pressure on the Lao government to take the kind of steps with respect to its increasing budgetary deficit, which I mentioned earlier, by reducing expenditures or increasing revenue or a combination of both. I made this point very strongly saying that the Lao shouldn’t look to the U.S. government and taxpayers to bail it out of this situation, upon which the Lao prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, said, “Laos is simply costing the U.S. government a small fraction of what it’s paying for the war in Vietnam,” indicating that we should be prepared to cough up more money for FEOF. With that the meeting broke up. This was my last official contact with the government on this point. I’ll talk at a future session about the consequences as far as I personally was concerned. This proved to be the real crux of the crisis. I’ll leave it at that for today on FEOF unless you have

some additional questions, Laura.

LC: Joe, is your plan to return to the discussion of this meeting at a later point or should I ask you more questions about the meeting itself?

JM: I had made my point at the meeting and, of course, I reported it by cable to Washington. Washington had not come back with any official position. The Lao government had not made any official demand for us, but it certainly was heading toward that position. So there had been no—there was no final resolution to this crisis when I left on home leave.

LC: Okay. Two questions, then. What was Souvanna Phouma's demeanor that day?

JM: Well, he was clearly annoyed with the position that I was taking, quite annoyed. I think Sisouk, the minister of finance, had obviously kept him very much abreast of this. I think both of them were taking the position that I was being a real obstacle toward a resolution of this crisis by trying to hold down demands for additional aid from the United States for it. So he obviously was—I had known that this was developing, this problem. I've forgotten whether it was probably just after this meeting and I knew I was leaving. I invited the prime minister and his wife to our house for dinner. Somewhat to my surprise he accepted, but he was anything but friendly throughout the whole dinner. He was a great bridge player. So I had arranged that a bridge table be set up for him to play after dinner. I had some other Lao ministers present at this dinner, but it proved to be anything but a friendly affair. Now, over the years up to that point we had been very friendly with Souvanna and he with us. I'll go into this in connection with my relations with Lao officials later in these sessions, Laura, but not today.

LC: Very good. Okay. The other question that I had, Joe, was about the representatives from Australia and Japan and France who were at this meeting, and the British. Do you, as you think about it now, recall the names? Were the ambassadors there?

JM: I know that the Australian ambassador, the French ambassador, and I think the Japanese ambassador were all present. Whether the British ambassador was there or, *charge d'affaires* I'm not sure because the British ambassador who had been there

most of the time I was in Laos had left, I think, a few weeks earlier. Whether his replacement had arrived—I think he had, but I'm not absolutely sure.

LC: Who was the British ambassador during this time?

JM: Fred Warner during most of the time I was there and I think he went from Laos to, maybe not directly, but later became the British ambassador to Japan.

LC: What about the Japanese? Can you tell us a little bit about your sense of their degree of involvement? Were they very much sort of standing back, almost like the French?

JM: Well, they made a real contribution to FEOF, but at that time, as so often, the Japanese never put themselves forward very strongly in any diplomatic situation. The man who was Japanese ambassador interestingly enough, I had known slightly in Switzerland, I think, fifteen years earlier when he was just starting out his career as a third secretary. He was a very diffident individual in addition to the diffident approach that his country tended to pursue at that stage. So I never expected anything very strong to come out of him. He was personally very friendly.

LC: Do you remember his name, Joe?

JM: I can't remember his name now, Laura.

LC: That's okay.

JM: The Australian ambassador we knew extremely well, Barrie Dexter. He and his wife and Nonie and I were close personal friends. As a matter of fact, we have stayed in touch ever since that time, almost forty years ago now. His wife unfortunately died I guess about a year ago, but we're still in touch with him. We have a lot of personal contact even after I retired, which I can mention at some point when we get to that.

LC: Very good.

JM: He was a high commissioner to Canada and subsequently ambassador to Yugoslavia. With him we worked closely both officially and personally, very nice guy. Incidentally, he also, when he retired from the diplomatic service he became the man in charge of Aboriginal Affairs for the Australian government. So he maintained a quite high position in the government.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: But not one that was extremely popular because a lot of Australians felt very

strongly about this issue, as you can see from our own immigration debate, I suppose.

LC: Oh, sure. Yeah. It's a huge issue in Australia.

JM: Right.

LC: He sounds like a very interesting fellow.

JM: Yeah, he was.

LC: Joe, carry on if you would. I'm not sure where you want to take us now.

JM: Well, where I'd like to go now, Laura, was the matter of my relations with members of Congress and the press while I was doing three years as director of the AID mission in Laos. I had resolved at the outset and tried to pursue this approach throughout the time I was there of maintaining friendly and cordial relations with any members of Congress that came to Laos, as well as with the press. We did not have resident American correspondents in Laos. There were many, many of them of course in Vietnam at that point, but we didn't have them in Laos. They tended to come for visits of a few days either from Bangkok in Thailand or from Vietnam and acquaint themselves or bring themselves up to date on the situation in Laos. They usually came around to the embassy to talk to the ambassador as well as to the AID mission to talk to me. So I had a pretty fair number of press contacts as well as quite a number of contacts with members of Congress while I was there.

LC: I'll bet.

JM: I'm going to start out with the vice president of the United States, Hubert Humphrey. You remember he had been chosen by Johnson in 1964 as his running mate and was elected along with Johnson, Johnson as president and Humphrey as vice president. We got a cable from Washington indicating that Humphrey was on a swing through Southeast Asia looking primarily and talking primarily about international and multi-lateral aid projects of a major nature for that area. This tour on his part, I think, was designed to try to show the world that the United States, in addition to engaging in military operations extensively in Vietnam, was also interested in economic projects of a major nature in order to—well, I'll put it bluntly, in order to quote "to win hearts and minds" of the people in Southeast Asia.

LC: Sure. Sure. As a counterbalance.

JM: This was Humphrey's underlying purpose for this trip. The cable indicated

that Humphrey wanted to see the site of the so-called Pa Mong project on the Mekong River. This is two words, P-A, second word M-O-N-G project on the Mekong River, this major artery itself. He wanted to come up to Laos to see it and also to discuss it. Now, this project had been around, talked about for well over ten years at that point. I remember when I first came into Southeast Asian affairs in 1955, one of the things I dealt with from the outset was regional projects in Southeast Asia and the Pa Mong project was being talked about even then. The estimate was that it would cost in 1950s dollars anywhere from eight hundred million to a billion dollars, which was a heck of a lot of money at that time, as you know. It doesn't sound like so much today.

LC: Yeah, but that's huge.

JM: As Senator Dirksen said in his office one time, I may have mentioned this before, I think this was in 1968, "A billion here and billion there and pretty soon it begins to amount to real money, doesn't it?"

LC: That's right.

JM: That was the '60s when we were already subject to considerable inflation. Anyway, this project had been discussed for a long, long time. It was designed to build a major dam on the mighty Mekong River itself, something that would have been akin to the Aswan Dam on the Nile in Egypt. So it was a huge thing. It was designed to furnish hydroelectric power to both Thailand and Laos, but particularly to Thailand because it was a much more significant consumer of power, as well as provide irrigation to adjacent areas in both Thailand and Laos. Part of the problem was that Thailand never really looked at this project with any great favor because it did not have control of the Mekong. The Mekong was essentially the boundary between it and Laos. So Thailand couldn't control the project completely and therefore since it had reservations about what might happen in the future in the international political sphere, it did not really feel comfortable about entrusting its power demands for the future to this big project. The major beneficiary was not very enthusiastic about it so this project had remained subject to discussion already for at least twelve years when Humphrey decided that he wanted to—obviously since he wanted to, people were still talking about it, but nobody was really doing anything in any significant way to bring it to realization.

LC: Well, Joe, had anything been done? Had surveys been done?

JM: No. I say—of a very preliminary nature, I don't think the kind of survey you're talking about, getting down to feasibility.

LC: Yes.

JM: No. I don't think so.

LC: So somebody had just kind of come with the idea and selected a location?

JM: It had been bandied about for a long time.

LC: And the location—

JM: We got this word that Humphrey wanted to see the project [site]. So Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, telephoned me and said, "I want you to fly down to Bangkok tomorrow. That's where Humphrey is going to be and accompany him on his airplane to see the site of this project and bring him on into Vientiane." So I immediately commandeered one of my airplanes. Since this project didn't seem likely ever to be realized, I had never even gone out to look at its site. It was not accessible by surface anyway.

LC: Where was it, Joe?

JM: Well, it was somewhere northwest of Vientiane.

LC: So further up the river than Vientiane.

JM: Further up the river from Vientiane, not too far, but far enough out that one could not get to it by surface. Anyway, I got this airplane and I flew out and looked over where the project would take place if it were ever built. Then the next day flew down to Bangkok and joined Humphrey on his big airplane. The embassy in Bangkok also put a representative on the airplane, surprisingly a rather minor official who I think had read about this project and didn't know nearly as much about it as I did. So this fell to me to brief Humphrey on it as we were flying from Bangkok to the site. So I made much more of an impression on him than this more or less minor official from the embassy in Bangkok. When we got up to the Mekong, cloud cover was pretty thick. There were openings from time to time. I couldn't be absolutely sure that I could even find the spot any longer, but during one cloud opening I looked down and I said, "Look, there's the site, Mr. Vice President. There's where it's going to be." Well, Humphrey bubbled over terrifically about seeing this. He thought this was absolutely great having a look at this site and continued in the same vein when we went on into Vientiane and

Bill Sullivan had us both for lunch at the house. Humphrey was praising me and being very delighted at what he had seen. I didn't mention any of my reservations about this likelihood of its ever being built. Of course, I pretended to share Humphrey's enthusiasm, but I must say I came away from this session with a pretty low opinion of the vice president of the United States. A naive individual impressed with something that was never likely to be realized at all. Here was the man who subsequently became the Democratic candidate for president in 1968 and came within, what was it, a hundred votes for the majority of the popular vote in that election.

LC: Well, it was a close one, that's for sure.

JM: The other rather well-known political liberal in the United States who was very enthusiastic about this project was Chester Bowles. Chester Bowles, as you may know, had been the head of the Office of Price Administration during World War II. He'd headed the price control administration and had subsequently stayed active in politics. He was governor of Connecticut for two years, I think, in the early 1950s. Well, I guess it was probably '48 to '50 and had remained very active in Democratic politics. He was always bubbling over as Humphrey was doing at this point about these big international projects in Southeast Asia and tended to feel that if we just went ahead with these projects all our problems would be solved. We wouldn't have to worry about continuing the war in Vietnam. I call it head-in-the-clouds approach to reality in this world. He was named by Kennedy when Kennedy became president as the number two official in the State Department as you may remember, Laura.

LC: Yes, uh-huh.

JM: You're not old enough to remember that, but you've probably read it.

LC: No. I have and I've read his works and about him in *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Sure.

JM: He was ambassador to India. He had already been ambassador to India at one point. Kennedy made him number two under Dean Rusk. Of course, the first big crisis Kennedy faced was over the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. Bowles let it be known publicly that he had looked askance at this whole thing from the beginning, in other words, trying to distance himself from this fiasco that Kennedy found himself in. Kennedy didn't appreciate this at all. So later in 1961 toward the end of the year he eased Bowles out of

the number two position and named him ambassador to India, his second stint there. At some point earlier than the Humphrey visit Bowles had dropped by Laos. He was ambassador of India dropping by Laos to talk to our ambassador. He wanted a briefing on the AID program. I remember I spent a whole Sunday morning giving him a thorough briefing on our AID program in Laos. He was delighted with that but again, he and Humphrey to me were two of a kind in having blinders on as far as reality was concerned. So that's my assessment of those two men and Humphrey's visit to Laos, Laura.

LC: Did the vice president ask you anything about your own background, Joe? Did he know that you were a Vietnam expert and had been in Vietnam for several years earlier?

JM: I do not know whether that came out. I can't remember at all, Laura. It probably did. Actually, let me see now. I guess when I was named director of the AID mission to Laos, I think, by President Johnson I got a letter of congratulations from Humphrey. I think it was then rather than when I became ambassador later. This came as a surprise to me because I didn't know Humphrey personally at all. I didn't think he knew anything about me, but I think maybe his office just did this as a matter of habit or a matter of course, looking forward to when Humphrey might need our political support in the future.

LC: I wondered whether you would actually say that, but yes, I think you're probably right. Joe, did he ask—do you remember any discussion either at the luncheon or on the plane earlier in which Humphrey asked about the general security situation on the Thai-Lao border or in Laos itself?

JM: Laura, I would imagine not with me, but with Bill Sullivan the issue must have come up, but I cannot remember specifically now, Laura, whether it was gone into in my presence or not.

LC: Did you have a chance to talk to him about the other projects that AID actually was undertaking, all of which you've outlined in detail in Laos?

JM: That probably came up to some extent, too, Laura. Again, I can't—

LC: That's okay. I'm sorry.

JM: The only thing I can remember was this most salient thing, the way this

man bubbled with enthusiasm over this project on the way up and then we got up over the site and continuing through lunch. Again as I say, not a leading political figure who impressed me favorably at all.

LC: The sense was that he had these sort of grandiose projects in mind as the solution to all the problems of poverty and so on?

JM: I don't think he was quite as naive as Chester Bowles.

LC: Well, I'm glad to hear that, actually.

JM: But obviously this was what he was supposed to be looking at for President Johnson. This is what he was aiming to sell to the public as how these things might help our foreign policy in general.

LC: I wonder if his approach was informed by some of what he thought about domestic policy. Certainly he was one of the kind of leftovers, second generation New Dealers who thought that poverty was the real problem in America and that if you could address poverty you would address urban violence and all those other issues.

JM: I'm sure, Laura, that's what influenced him very substantially.

LC: Which is a little worrying, really, when you apply it to a completely different culture and different terrain and different histories. These things don't transfer that easily.

JM: Well, yeah. I think it's also worth recalling that after he had served as vice president and then defeated in 1968 for president, he subsequently ran for his old Senate seat in Minnesota and won. So he was again in the Senate at least in the '70s. He probably was not elected prior to 1970. I can't remember what year he was re-elected there, elected again to his Senate seat. But he was the author, together with a man from the House of Representatives of the so-called Full Employment Act which levied on the Federal Reserve the requirement that it considered not only inflation and prices as part of its mission, but also aimed for full employment. The two are often enough, as you know, work in antithesis to each other. That I'm not sure over the longer run was a constructive piece of legislation, but it's typical of the kind of thing that Humphrey engaged in throughout his career.

LC: Yes, I think that's right. I think that's right, Joe.

JM: He's well known for that, of course, in the Democratic Party. The act is

called—I think it's the Humphrey-Hawkins Act as I recall.

LC: I think that's right. Humphrey-Hawkins, yeah. Well, he's one of the people that the new Democrats wanted to leave behind. I don't know whether they've been successful in doing that, but yes.

JM: He's a very nice person personally. I liked him as an individual.

LC: Right, but as you said, a bit naive.

JM: Exactly.

LC: That's interesting.

JM: Yet I think he was first elected to the Senate in the late ['40s] was it or not?

LC: Well, I think he had been mayor of Minneapolis.

JM: Right.

LC: Then I'm not quite sure of his trajectory after that.

JM: Maybe it was in the '40s that he—he was in the Senate for a good long time and then re-elected later. Of course, there was an earlier vice president who went through the same rigmarole, Senator Barkley, who had been in the Senate for quite a number of years when Truman chose him as his vice presidential candidate in 1968 or '48, excuse me for that correction.

LC: That's okay.

JM: Barkley served him as vice president for four years. Then Truman decided not to run so Barkley was out as vice president. Barkley ran for his old Senate seat again and gained it. This was not something unknown as far as vice presidents were concerned for Humphrey to do the same thing.

LC: Joe, do you have a sense of when Chester Bowles came on the visit that you have recalled?

JM: I would suspect sometime in 1966 or early '67. I'm not quite sure of the date, Laura.

LC: Were there other VIPs, American politicians, whose visits through Vientiane you remember?

JM: Oh, yeah. I'm going to get to that.

LC: Very good. I figured.

JM: There were a lot of members of Congress, Laura.

LC: Okay, very good.

JM: Yeah. The first visit that I recall was within a month of my arrival there when a delegation of several senators headed by Ted Kennedy came up to Vientiane, stayed over one night and went down to Thailand the next day. Kennedy was already preparing himself to oppose Johnson on his Vietnam policy despite the fact that what Johnson was really doing was continuing the policy that had been adopted by his brother John Kennedy before his assassination. Kennedy became very wary of the whole U.S. mission. I think he stayed overnight with Bill Sullivan as ambassador. I'm not sure. I think he probably did. I know Bill asked me to put up another member of the delegation, Senator Tydings of Maryland, because I was a native Marylander. Now this Tydings was not what I call the Great Tydings. I guess it was his stepfather actually, but Tydings had adopted—this younger Tydings had adopted his name. His stepfather had been a very important Democratic senator from 1926 to 1950. One of the significant things about that Tydings, in 1938 in the Democratic primary in Maryland in which Tidings was running for his third term, President Roosevelt tried to purge him because that Tydings was a very conservative figure. You may recall President Roosevelt tried to purge Senator George of Georgia, Senator Cotton Ed Smith of South Carolina and Senator Tydings, three conservative Democrats who were not supporting the New Deal the way Roosevelt thought they should be. Roosevelt was unsuccessful in all those cases. I might mention, Laura, I was eighteen at the time. This was the first political campaign in which I got involved at all. I was supporting Tydings's opponent in the primary. I was a very liberal Democrat then. I was supporting his opponent, a congressman from western Maryland by the name of Lewis. I remember I got all of one dollar for the activities in which I engaged as political recompense for all the expenditures I made personally.

LC: What kinds of things did you do, Joe?

JM: Well, I think I did some electioneering around the immediate area where my home was. I remember also I put great big posters up on our milk house supporting Tydings's opponent. My father was then, in addition to being a farmer, was also a livestock dealer. Some of his customers protested the fact that I was supporting Tydings's opponent. They didn't like it. But my father backed me up, but Tydings

won the primary and he won re-election in ’38. The other important thing about Tydings’s political career is that it came to a very dramatic end in 1950 when he was running for his fifth term at that point. He was a very senior senator, head of the Armed Services Committee, but he ran afoul of Senator McCarthy on McCarthy’s campaign about communists in the U.S. government. He accused Tydings of not doing enough against communists in the Defense Department as chairman of the Armed Services Committee. To great surprise, not only of Marylanders but of the whole nation, Tydings lost his seat that year to a Republican in a state that was normally pretty Democratic. That was considered a real wake-up call about McCarthy, particularly his defeat of Tydings, a real wake-up call about the political power that McCarthy was able to exert in the country. That really pushed McCarthy forward as far as public opinion was concerned. It made him very much a center of public attention. So this was the stepfather of the Tydings who came to Laos and whom I put up overnight. This particular younger Tydings was very cool and aloof almost to the point of arrogance. I found I did not like him personally very much. Then I had a real problem the next day. We were going in two or three airplanes with this congressional delegation and the ambassador up to one of the aid projects in Sayaboury province, which was the province, oh, more or less east of Vientiane, the only full province east of the Mekong River, to visit one of these aid projects. We got out to the airplane, loaded it up and I had carried Tydings’s bag out and put it down before the airplane was ready to load us and got involved in something else, I can’t remember what. I didn’t really see it aboard the airplane. Then from the AID project site this whole delegation was leaving directly to go to Bangkok. When it was time to load up the airplanes there Tydings’s biggest bag couldn’t be found. He held me personally responsible for not having carried his bag aboard and was getting very huffy about the whole thing when finally, thank God, his bag was found and loaded on.

LC: Did he berate you, Joe, in front of—

JM: Yes. It was very clear that he was extremely annoyed me with about the whole thing. I had been doing my utmost in dealing with my first congressional delegation as director of the AID mission to make sure everything went well. So I was feeling particularly badly about this and suddenly found myself as the butt of his scorn

and attacks. Fortunately, as far as I was concerned, the bag was found. When he came up for reelection in 1970 he went down to defeat, to my joy, a Republican. That was not a very pleasant experience that I had with this first delegate. Incidentally another member of that delegation—I think both Tydings and the man I'm going to mention now were sort of acolytes of Kennedy. They both had been elected in '64. Kennedy was a bit their senior and he was the head of this congressional delegation. This other fellow was Senator Tunney from California who was the son of the man who had become boxing champion in the 1920s in the States in another clamorous development when he defeated Jack Dempsey who had been the leading boxer prior to that time.

LC: Sure. Mm-hmm.

JM: He did it I think—won by dancing around. A lot of Americans felt he didn't stand up very much as a man to Jack Dempsey, but he danced around and managed to win on points. Anyway, Tunney's father had won the championship and then Tunney was elected Senator from California in '64. He also lost his seat to a Republican when he came up in '70. As far as I could see I didn't have much contact. He was a nice young man, but very, very withdrawing. He couldn't thrust himself forward at all but he, too, lost his seat just like Tydings. So these were three senators in that delegation. I can't remember whether there were others or not. There may have been because it was a fairly large delegation. Well, anyway, that was the first congressional delegation I had to deal with in Laos.

LC: Well, Joe, can I ask you about Ted Kennedy?

JM: Yeah.

LC: What impression did you form of him at this point? Obviously you would have known a great deal about him.

JM: Again, he obviously had little regard for the whole U.S. mission in Laos and for what we were trying to do because what he was looking for was a way to get information to score points against his own party leader, President Johnson. Again, we did not get a favorable impression of him at all during this visit. The hostility wasn't open. It was sufficiently evident that we all could feel it.

LC: Really?

JM: Mm-hmm.

LC: Okay. Joe, let's take a break there.

JM: Yeah.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [45] of [57]
Date: August 11, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the eleventh of August 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking as he usually does by telephone from Nevada. Hello, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Hello, Laura.

LC: Joe, if you'd like to I think it would be great if we can pick up and continue the discussion we were having last week about the VIP visitors and some of the press people.

JM: Right. The last thing I discussed during our last interview was the visit by a senatorial delegation in October of 1965 to Laos, a delegation headed by Senator Edward Kennedy, which included several other senators whose names I remember. One was Tunney of California and Tydings of Maryland. I indicated I think that Tydings, I put up Tydings—Nonie and I put up Tydings because I was born in Maryland. Tydings did not prove to be a very gracious or warm guest at all. As a matter of fact, I do not look back on his visit with any pleasure whatsoever. However, another senatorial delegation visit proved to be quite the contrary as far as I personally was concerned. This was a visit I think about 1967—I'm pretty sure it was 1967—headed by Sen. Mike Mansfield who was the Democratic majority leader of the Senate as well as a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It included several senators. The only one that I remember aside from Mansfield, whom I did not meet incidentally during this visit because this particular delegation I think was interested primarily in political matters not in the AID program, and concentrated its dealings I think almost exclusively with the ambassador and may have met with the prime minister. I just don't recall. The senator I put up was Sen. Caleb Boggs of Delaware. I put him up because, as I've indicated to you, I got my bachelor's degree at the University of Delaware even though I was a native Marylander. A mutual friend of Senator Boggs and mine, the widow of my revered history professor at Delaware, was actually quite close to Boggs. Her father had been involved in Republican politics in Delaware. She remained very interested and

maintained contact with a number of Republican figures, including Senator Boggs. Anyway, it was just one night, but we put him up at our house. Though I did not have any particular dealings with him as far as the AID program was concerned that I recall—I'm not sure we even got into it at all—he proved to be the total antithesis of Senator Tydings. Boggs was very gregarious, open, warm, friendly. As a matter of fact, when he left the next day after that overnight visit he indicated that he would be glad to do anything he could in Washington to help me out personally. As a matter of fact, later he was helpful in pushing my nomination through the Nixon White House as ambassador to Madagascar and also through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of which he was a member. So I have a very good recollection of his visit, contrary to the one when Tydings stayed with us, and regretted very much that Boggs was defeated in 1972, narrowly defeated by a senator who is still there, Biden, the senior Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee. Boggs had served two terms and went down to narrow defeat in '72 to this then very young Biden. So that particular visit has remained in my memory with fine recollection, which even had some personal consequences as far as I was concerned.

LC: Sure, sure. Joe, when we come to talk about the nomination process I'll perhaps have a chance to ask you again about his influence later on. What kinds of things was he interested in learning about Laos, not about the AID mission?

JM: I do not recall any substantive discussion with him at all. We probably had some, but as I say they were primarily interested, that delegation, I think, in the political element. I had a discussion with the ambassador. I just can't remember any substantive talks with him at all on the issue, but a lot of personal talk and recollections about the University of Delaware because he was also a graduate of the University of Delaware.

LC: Had he studied some of the same things you had? Had he studied history? What was his background?

JM: Laura, I don't recall. I don't know whether we ever got into that. I don't know. He was not a very profound man, but he had very wide-ranging interests. Therefore I think we discussed a lot of things of a more or less personal nature without getting very much into substance as far as Laos was concerned.

LC: Well, it seems quite clear that you left an impression on him as well.

JM: I've always regarded my contacts with him with the very warmest recollection. Now I'm going to move on to another senator who made an individual visit to Laos. I met him only at a late Sunday breakfast at the ambassador's residence. The ambassador invited me to join him. This was Senator Abe Ribicoff of Connecticut who was then, I think—this was also probably 1967. I think he was still in his first term. He served two or maybe three terms in the Senate altogether and had been governor of Connecticut before, and I suppose again a personal relationship didn't do any harm. Nonie's parents were residents of Connecticut. So that's always helpful. Not always, but usually it's helpful when you're dealing with members of Congress. It did not prove helpful, of course, with Tydings even though my parents were still living in Maryland at the time, but at least it helps usually to grease the path to subsequent interrelationships with members of Congress. Anyway, Ribicoff at that time was the head of a subcommittee of the Senate, I think they called it the Senate Government Operations Committee, which did a lot of investigating of the executive branch of the government. The chairman of that committee was Senator McClellan, a very senior Democrat from Arkansas who was also a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, which he became chairman of before he elected to retire. I think he served as senator for something like forty years. So he was a very highly-regarded figure. I never met him, but I take it that he could be a rather difficult personality to deal with as far as other senators were concerned. I suppose he was very aware of his seniority and the significance of that at that time in the Senate, I think more so than today.

LC: Yes. Mm-hmm. Yes.

JM: Anyway, Ribicoff evidently had good relations with the chairman of this committee, with Senator McClellan. McClellan was very pleased with the way Ribicoff was handling the chairmanship of the subcommittee. So Ribicoff was quite interested in management, particularly of the finances of our AID programs abroad. So I briefed him extensively on our AID program and the cost-cutting tough approach that I was trying to take. He was obviously very well impressed because he went back to Washington. When he saw Bill Goud who was the head of the AID agency in Washington, commended what I was doing in Laos and said, "You ought to get your director of the

AID mission in Vietnam to handle the program the same way." Of course, I don't think he endeared the director of Vietnam as far as I was concerned, but anyway. Ribicoff was quite favorably impressed and I remember I called on him, I think, when I was back in Washington in '68 and had a very good session with him. So I felt that I developed very good relations with Ribicoff. Now another significant visitor, not that significant at the time but proved subsequently to be very much so, was young George Bush. I think I've mentioned this at least in passing in some of our discussions before, Laura. Bush was then a freshman member of the House of Representatives. He had been elected for the first time in 1966. He came to Laos just for about twenty-four hours on a lone mission. I spent an entire Sunday ferrying him around Laos on one of our airplanes, looking at various aspects of our AID program, including taking him up into the northeast and I think probably having him talk to Pop Buell up there. Bush was obviously very favorably impressed with what we were doing with the AID program. When we got back to—I think I mentioned this before—when we got back to Vientiane at the end of that long day's trip I said I was going to play badminton that evening since I usually got my weekly exercise Sunday morning doing that. He said, "Oh, may I join you?" I said, "Sure," and I thought, oh, God, this guy is going to be a pushover." Well, as it turned out he was a far better badminton player than anybody else on the court that evening.

LC: Is that right?

JM: Oh, yes. Absolutely very athletic and absolutely first rate as a badminton player.

LC: Interesting.

JM: Then, I think I mentioned this before. He found out during the course of our travels that Sunday that our middle daughter, Priscilla, was in her first year at Abbott Academy, a sister academy of Andover in Andover, Massachusetts. He said, "Oh, I'm on the board of trustees of Andover. The next time I go there I'll take Priscilla out to lunch." I thanked him very much, but chalked it up silently as one of those promises you get by visiting politicians which never come to anything. Well, indeed, the next time he went he not only invited Priscilla, he invited her roommate with her for lunch because he thought she would be more comfortable if she had her roommate with her. So my early personal contacts with George Bush, Sr.—this is not

the present president, this is the forty-first president—are certainly extremely gratifying.

LC: Absolutely. That's fascinating. That's really fascinating. Obviously he stuck to his word, which is a very interesting moment.

JM: Yes, very surprising.

LC: Yes, very, very. Especially on a trip like this.

JM: Right.

LC: What interest did he have? Was he on a particular committee? Why was he there, Joe? Do you know?

JM: I don't remember what committee he was on, Laura. Anything I say would be a sheer guess. So I—

LC: Yeah. I'm afraid I don't recall, either.

JM: But he was very interested in the AID program. As a matter of fact, quite a number of congressmen who came out were interested in the AID program for different reasons. I remember—do you want to ask any more questions about him before I move on?

LC: No. Go ahead. Go ahead.

JM: I remember again, I think this was not too long after I arrived. We had a visit by a House group, I think about half-a-dozen representatives, three of whom I remember. Again I'll mention their names.

LC: Sure.

JM: One was Senator—no, excuse me. These were members of the House of Representative—Brock of Tennessee who was subsequently elected to the Senate for one term and also became chairman of the Democratic National Committee, as well as Secretary of Labor. I assume that must have been under Reagan because he was senator from '70 to '76 and was defeated for re-election in '76. He was a member of this group. Another member was Robert Taft, Jr. His father had been a very prominent senator, actually known as Mr. Republican. Taft, like Brock, was elected subsequently in 1970 to the Senate for one term and also was defeated in 1976. I assume it was his son who was the outgoing governor of Ohio. I think he's had two terms as governor.

LC: I believe so.

JM: Of course, this is the Taft that I'm talking about. His grandfather was president from what, 1909 to 1913. So it's a very prominent Republican family in the state of Ohio.

LC: A dynasty, really, not unlike the Bushes in some way.

JM: Exactly. A third member of that delegation whom I remember was Representative Moorehead of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Moorehead was a liberal Democrat, very interested in labor. I had subsequent contacts with him as well, and always found him extremely friendly and open. He could be particularly useful in dealing with liberal circles in the Democratic Party. Now this group had some interest in AID programs. I don't think it was the kind of interest that the senatorial delegation led by Senator Kennedy had who was looking for ammunition with which to attack President Johnson. This group, I think, had a genuine interest, particularly in the extent to which AID programs were being extended to the countryside, I suppose, in order to win the hearts and minds of the people in the war in Southeast Asia. I took this delegation on a trip one afternoon about, oh, twenty miles, twenty-five miles, perhaps, north of Vientiane where we had a resident young AID representative and his wife working with the district chief in that particular area. They got a good feel as to how he was operating. This was the kind of thing they were interested in. Incidentally, I might mention that some years subsequent to this, this young fellow and his wife had stayed in that area for several years and some years subsequent the communists came in one evening. He got a hint of this before they entered his residence. He and his wife got into some tunnel underground and the communists were calling for him by name and offering to kill him. His wife subsequently wrote this up and sent us a copy. This was long after we left Laos, this harrowing experience through which they went for quite a number of hours that night.

LC: Horrible

JM: It was. It gives one a feel for the risks and dangers for which these people living in the provinces underwent in both Vietnam and Laos during the war years. It was not something that was a walkover by any means.

LC: Joe, did she write that up for publication or was it for just private circulation?

JM: I don't know whether she ever published it or not. I don't know what I was doing at the time she sent it, but she sent us a copy. I went through it with almost baited breath. I had heard about this, but she gave all the details.

LC: This occurred after you had departed.

JM: Yeah. This occurred some years after I left. I would say this probably occurred somewhere, I'm just guessing now, somewhere about '70 or '71, I think.

LC: Goodness.

JM: Well, anyway, this was another delegation which I had to deal with and with which everything went very well. There were also quite a number of individual members, particularly of the House of Representatives, or sometimes two of them. I remember there was two who came from the state of New York, one from Long Island and one from Buffalo, both Democrats. I think they both stayed with Nonie and me, actually, and interested in the AID program. The one from Buffalo I think shortly afterwards ran for the Senate and went down to defeat, but the one from Long Island continued for a number of years in the House of Representatives until he was outflanked on the left and defeated in a Democratic primary. I remember after I got back to Washington in '68, I used to call on him from time to time to try to get him to line up in support for the appropriation for the Vietnam AID program. Though he was personally sympathetic, he never really went along. I think the reason was he was always afraid of being outflanked on the left from Long Island and indeed that's what happened to his political career eventually.

LC: Do you recall his name, Joe?

JM: His name was Lester Wolff, W-O-L-F-F. I can remember another congressman from New York with his wife who stayed overnight with us. I'm not sure they were all that much—I can't remember his name—I'm not sure they were all that much interested in what was going on in Laos. I think it was a foreign junket as far as they were concerned. Not unpleasant, but not very substantive. We had quite a number of members of Congress that passed through Laos, almost always very quickly. The care and feeding of congressmen, members of Congress, was an important part of our activities as you can see.

LC: Well, absolutely, and particularly because of the size of the operation that

you were running in Laos this would have been critical, I'm sure, as funding issues came up. You wanted to put, my guess would be, the best face on the operation and what you were trying to achieve there, not just in terms of—

JM: I think they wanted a real feel for what we were trying to achieve.

LC: Right. Right.

JM: Our hearts were headed in the right direction.

LC: Well, did you find that there was greater curiosity or greater investigative interest on the part of folks after, let's say, after mid-1967? Did you notice any change as the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam increased? Did you notice a degree of difference?

JM: I think we probably had an increase. I'm pretty sure. I can't remember the dates of all these, but I think there were more of them in the latter years I was there than in the earlier years for the very reason you've indicated. Usually their primary interest was Vietnam, but since they were in the area quite a number of them came on up to Laos because Laos was involved in the war as well.

LC: Would they generally have been given a kind of, probably, cleaned up briefing at the embassy? What would be the kind of usual routine for a twenty-four-hour visit by a congressman?

JM: Well, they were always interested, I think, in a briefing by the ambassador. Bill Sullivan would I think—Bill was an extremely able and clever individual. I think he always handled these visits with great tact and care, not to reveal to most of them, to a lot of them the inner activities with respect to the so-called secret CIA war in northeastern Laos. I think he was very careful with whom he discussed that because one could not be sure that leaks wouldn't occur.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: So I didn't participate in his briefings. I did my own with those who were interested in the AID program, but I'm sure there was interest of many of them in both aspects of U.S. activities, the political-military as well as the AID program.

LC: Although you were out there in Vientiane and I know that you did go back to Washington for consultations at least once during this time period—

JM: Oh, I went back at least three times.

LC: Did you go three times?

JM: Yeah.

LC: We'll hopefully have a chance to talk about that. Joe, were you seeing essentially bipartisan—I mean, what was the feeling that you got, essentially bipartisan support for the AID budget and the AID work of the mission that you were running?

JM: Laura, as I've indicated there were Democrats who were already becoming somewhat disaffected, like Kennedy, and beginning to look for ammunition with which to belabor the president from their own party, Lyndon Johnson, even though he was carrying on the policies which had been inaugurated by his brother Jack Kennedy. I don't recall any Republicans who visited us who were looking for ammunition with which to attack the Democrats. I think the Republicans were by and large very much in support of what we were doing in Southeast Asia. I think most of the Democrats still were at that stage. Later, of course, that changed, certainly with respect to the Democrats and to a degree as far as the Republicans were concerned. The Tet Offensive, of course, occurred in February of 1968. I was just in Laos for three or four months after that. I don't think we had any congressional delegations during that period. That was the watershed as far as political opinion in both the Congress and the press and the public were concerned. So it was later, really, after my departure from Laos that one began to get much more of the kind of thing you were just raising. Whether there was bipartisan support or whether there was partisan sniping, there was much more of that later from Congressional delegations than at the time I was there.

LC: Of course, you had to deal with some of that fraying of the consensus when you were in Washington.

JM: Oh, yes, very definitely because as I shall indicate I was in Washington for a year-and-a-half from the summer of '68 to the end of '69. We will go into that rather soon I think, Laura.

LC: Absolutely. Were there other visitors who were others on your list? I'm thinking also of people who were not necessarily—you've mentioned the Continental Airlines visitors and so on.

JM: One in particular, Laura, I want to mention to you because it was to me a very interesting visit both personally and professionally. This was a visit by Hamilton

Fish Armstrong and his wife. I think certainly your people who have access to these interviews will not know Armstrong, but you probably do, at least by reputation.

LC: Just generally.

JM: Armstrong was the chief executive, I guess you'd probably call it secretary or secretary general, of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York for at least I would say thirty years. I know he had that position in the mid-1930s. He visited Laos probably in '66 or '67. He still had that position. So it was well over thirty years. I would say that Hamilton Fish Armstrong was probably, along with Walter Lippman, the two best-known foreign relations experts outside of those in the U.S. government. I think even better known than any academic in that field. I think for private persons they were the two best known and Armstrong was certainly one of them, a man of immense, immense prestige. Now interestingly, when he and his wife were there Bill Sullivan asked me to take Armstrong and his wife up to northeastern Laos, not just to the principal AID site, Sam Thong, but also to the secret site, Long Tieng, where usually any visitor from the United States was never taken because that was the headquarters for the secret war. That's where General Vang Pao, the Meo chieftain, had his headquarters. Armstrong and his wife, Nonie, and myself, met with Vang Pao there for a good session. As a matter of fact, Vang Pao gave both Armstrong and Nonie a heavy silver Meo necklace. He gave each of these ladies one at the end of the visit. So he obviously had some acquaintanceship with the influence which Armstrong could exert in the United States. I think Bill Sullivan had obviously given Armstrong a good briefing on what was happening. I think Vang Pao didn't pull any punches in his talk.

LC: Did he not?

JM: So Armstrong got a much more profound political-military briefing than many members of Congress did. Again that indicates the extent to which he was influential in the foreign policy field.

LC: Do you have a sense of when this visit might have taken place, Joe?

JM: It was either '66 or '67, Laura.

LC: Okay. So right in the middle of your tour.

JM: Right. I remember Armstrong and his wife were there for several days because I remember another day when Nonie and I took Armstrong and his wife out to

the Lao province immediately to the east of Vientiane province, called Borikhane province, where we met with again our local young AID representative and his wife to discuss the AID program in that area. We had a very fine picnic lunch with drinks at some point because I remember at the end of the luncheon buying from some Lao selling them a tropical fruit called long an, L-O-N-G, second word A-N, which look on the exterior a little bit like a lychee, but they're much smaller. They're round and small and when you bite into them the first immediate sensation is a taste of ether, which I think puts a lot of people off, but since it passes almost instantaneously you chew the white fruit off the big seed and the small fruit. There's very little flesh. It's delicious. Of course, they had never eaten them before and thought they were absolutely luscious, which both Nonie and I think. I remember that very well. Very few Americans, certainly Americans who have never lived in the tropics, would think of eating long an.

LC: Did you have a good day with the two of them? Did you find them compatible?

JM: Oh, yeah. We had an excellent day both personally and professionally with them. We were very favorably impressed with both of them. I just want to mention one more thing about the long ans.

LC: Sure.

JM: I don't know whether you noticed it or not, but one of the food sections of *The New York Times* within the past two or three days—

LC: I didn't see it. No.

JM: Excuse me?

LC: I did not see it, Joe.

JM: It carried an article on mangosteen, another tropical fruit which has utterly no relationship with mangos even though the first part of the fruit is spelled the same way, mangosteen, which we also became very well acquainted with in Vietnam, Laos and Madagascar. This particular article also mentioned in an incidental way long ans and another tropical fruit called rambutan. So it was very interesting that you and I are discussing this now and just a couple of days ago I saw long ans mentioned in *The New York Times* just in passing.

LC: Have you found yourself able to get hold of any of this where you are now,

Joe?

JM: No. No.

LC: Not a hope.

JM: No. Actually, according to this article, mangosteens cannot—they can grow only in certain areas and they're most prevalent in Southeast Asia. The Department of Agriculture has up until now forbidden their importation because of health reasons and disease reasons.

LC: Sure.

JM: Just now I think are licensing them from—oh, I think it's one particular producer in Thailand. This article, I think, was about an American who was trying to produce mangosteen somewhere in the States. I think it was in the States. I've forgotten where it was. Anyway, he's had his troubles doing it. Oh, it's in Puerto Rico, I think, that he's trying to produce them.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: Yeah. They are a delicious fruit. They are extremely different from mangoes and they're different from long ans or rambutan even though the flesh of all of them is white. They are quite a different shape and consistency than the long ans as I say are probably closer to lychees than anything else. Rambutan are in a class by themselves also. Incidentally, rambutan I think is a Malayan word. The word used in Vietnam for rambutan was chum chum.

LC: Is that right?

JM: Yeah.

LC: Was that a generic word for all fruit or was it specific?

JM: No. No. That was just the name for rambutan. I remember you and I, before we started engaging in our official discussion today were talking about the last Vietnamese ambassador, Tran Kim Phuong. I remember when Nonie and I and our three kids visited Tran Kim Phuong and his wife in Malaysia in 1962, I think it was. He was then, I guess, the ambassador to Malaya. We met him, it may have been in Malaysia at that point and he was the consul general in Singapore, but we visited him in both places actually on that trip. His wife had a big bowl of rambutan just outside our bedroom because the kids loved rambutan. All these personal reminiscences, Laura, are

not getting us anywhere.

LC: Actually, they are quite interesting and it makes me think that possibly I should have asked for Priscilla's report on Congressman Bush. It was good of him to recall and to take her to lunch, but how did she feel about him? Do you remember?

JM: Oh, yeah. She enjoyed the luncheon very much because he knew how to get down to the level of these kids. They were in high school and not even in college at that point.

LC: Oh, sure.

JM: He knew how to deal with them effectively. After all, he had, what, four kids of his own, including the present president.

LC: Oh, yes. That's correct, who was a handful as we understand him in his youth.

JM: Exactly, as a younger man.

LC: That's right. Now, Joe, can you just mention again the name of the academy that Priscilla was enrolled in?

JM: Yes. It was Abbot, A-B-B-O-T, Academy in Andover. I think it has now been integrated totally with Andover, but at that point it was—I think they shared faculty, but they were separate campuses although I think the girls and the boys did get together from what I understand.

LC: Oh, I'm sure. I think that was, yes, a pretty safe bet. Joe, how did you decide, if you can say anything about this, to send one of your daughters there? Obviously it has a terrific reputation academically, but how did you come to that decision? Can you say anything about that?

JM: Well, Laura, I'm not sure I remember the exact circumstances other than the reasons Priscilla went there. The basic reason was that the American school in Vientiane went to just the equivalent of the first level of high school. After that the children of American residents in Vientiane had to go elsewhere. A number of the families sent their children to an American school in Baguio, the hill resort in the Philippines. We decided to send Priscilla back to the States, sort of a wrenching decision on Nonie's part, but we'd also already left our oldest daughter there for her last year of high school and subsequently college when we went to

Laos in ’65.

LC: Right.

JM: So two years later we had to send Priscilla off, too. Nonie made this decision. If you ever talk to her you’ll have to ask her why she decided on Abbott. I don’t exactly remember the circumstances, Laura.

LC: Okay, well, I’ll steer that one toward her when I have the opportunity. Let’s take a break there.

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I'm continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the eighth of September 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador as usual is speaking from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thank you very much for your patience and, of course, for you time this morning. Joe, we were talking in our last session about visitors who came through Vientiane while you were there as head of the USAID mission. I wonder if you can pick up that story and continue for us.

JM: Yes, Laura. I'd like to move on with relations with American press correspondents.

LC: Very good.

JM: We had no resident American press correspondents in Laos. Of course, in Vietnam they were a legion but not in Laos. Partly I think it was because of the controls that were exercised over military activities in Laos. Those controls arose because of the sensitivities and desires of the Lao neutralist prime minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma. He didn't want military activities publicized at all because he felt that would undermine his neutralist aura in international circles which he found useful in certain political respects. So the so-called secret war in northeastern Laos with the Meo fighting the Vietnamese and Lao communists up there and supported by CIA was kept almost totally off limits as far as correspondents were concerned. That was relatively easy to do because there was really—as I've indicated, there was no surface transportation into northeastern Laos. I don't think there were any planes available for rent by private individuals. The only means of transportation were the two airline companies under contract to the U.S. government, Air America and Continental. So as far as I know, correspondents never got up into that area at all certainly during the time I was there. Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, because of Souvanna Phouma's sensitivities, exercised very strict control over that. The American bombing campaign of the Ho Chi Minh

Trail, down which North Vietnam infiltrated both troops and armaments into South Vietnam, Souvanna Phouma also wanted kept out of the public realm. So that also as far as I am aware, although I think the public to some degree became aware of it through press articles, I'm not aware that press correspondents really got in it. They certainly didn't get into the area on the ground. That would have been too dangerous for them. I don't recall any indications that they got to fly over from the air, from which they probably couldn't have seen a great deal from a real story impact point of view anyway. In any case, we did have quite a number of visits from American press correspondents stationed in Thailand mainly and some from Vietnam who would come up for a day or two and wanted to be briefed by the ambassador on the situation in Laos. Usually they also came over to the AID mission for a briefing on the AID program. I don't recall that—I always gave them a very generous and rather full briefing. I don't recall that we were ever let down by any press correspondents as far as the AID program was concerned. Two correspondents I remember particularly well because they were related to me personally in a sense. One was Chalmers Roberts of the *Washington Post* who was then a very prominent correspondent. You've heard his name?

LC: Yes. Absolutely. Yes.

JM: Yeah. Well, he came out on a—I think he was mainly the political correspondent in the Capitol for the *Post*, but he came out to Laos on a visit and he came over. We had quite a discussion and to my surprise a few Sundays later in one of the main sections of the *Post*, I guess what was equivalent to the *Week in Review* of *The New York Times* my picture and the picture of Pop Buell, our representative up in northeastern Laos were both on the front page in connection with our AID program activities in Laos. So I got some good publicity out of that one.

LC: I guess so. That's not bad.

JM: The other press correspondent whom I remember was a gentleman from the *Baltimore Sun* to whom I gave an extensive briefing. Since he learned during the briefing that I was born in Maryland and since the *Baltimore Sun*, of course, is the principal newspaper in that area he talked about my personal life. Shortly thereafter he got back to the States an item both on our program and on my Maryland origins appeared in the *Baltimore Sun*. He stressed my rather tough dealings with the Lao in administering

the AID program. I got quite a number of copies of that article from friends and relatives in the States, particularly in Maryland and Washington. Bill Sullivan did express some apprehension about the fact that I had talked so much about tough dealings with the Lao. He thought if it got to the Lao it might produce an adverse reaction, but I got a very opposite comeback from Bill Gaud, who was the head of the AID agency in Washington. He sent me a note congratulating me on the very good type, the kind of press coverage he wanted to get for the AID program which he was getting from my talks with correspondents—

LC: I would have thought. Yes.

JM: On the *Baltimore Sun*.

LC: Yes.

JM: Of course Bill Gaud's interest and Bill Sullivan's interests were somewhat different in how the subject was handled.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: That's a succinct summary of dealings with press correspondents, Laura, unless you have some questions.

LC: Just very quickly, Joe. Do you recall the name of the *Sun* reporter?

JM: No, I have it in my files I'm sure, Laura, but I do not recall it offhand.

LC: Well, you know, a keen student could run and find that out.

JM: Right. Right.

LC: Very good. It sounds very interesting. Was that one of the times while in Laos that you received a direct communication from Bill Gaud?

JM: Yes. I'm not sure I ever got—I can remember one other one which I'll get to shortly later this morning, I think.

LC: Okay.

JM: I don't recall any others that I got from Bill as a matter of fact. Now, Laura, I'd like to proceed, if you agree, to my relations with the Lao.

LC: Certainly.

JM: That I'll deal with much more extensively than the previous subject. I've already indicated that I conducted annual program reviews with almost all the Lao ministers to make sure that they were aware of what we were doing and that they

approved of the programs for the ensuing year which had been developed between the AID mission and their staffs. As I've indicated, I think I felt these were extremely useful. It was usually pretty much a one-sided presentation on my part since I don't think their staffs had briefed them that extensively. The Lao government did not operate that efficiently. So I think this was a very useful device from the standpoint of both the Lao ministers and the AID mission. We also, sometimes on inauguration of projects and certainly on completion of AID projects, would arrange with Lao ministers to have public ceremonies about them. Sometimes Bill Sullivan, as the ambassador, representative of the AID mission [at] these ceremonies, usually I did and it was almost invariably with a minister from one of the Lao departments of government who represented the Lao. We usually would each make a little speech, often out in the provinces, even in villages. I think this was useful in both making sure that the ministers were aware of what we were doing and what we were accomplishing and also in trying to show the Lao villagers that their ministers were trying to do something to improve their lot in the world. So from both political standpoints I think it was a very useful device. Another activity which I launched while I was there was to get a brochure periodically updated in both French and Lao on the AID program to make sure that there was as wide knowledge as possible in Laos of what we were doing. Despite my busy schedule of twelve to fifteen hours a day, I even engaged in some writing of the original version of that brochure to make sure that it was presented in understandable laymen terms and not in bureaucrat-ese as government personnel often put things out, which would have made no sense whatsoever to the Lao readers. I think this was also a useful device in extending the knowledge of the Lao at all levels as to what we were trying to do, particularly since media activities in Laos were very, very limited to say the least.

LC: Yes. How would they be distributed, Joe? What was the plan for that?

JM: Well, we would certainly make sure they got distributed throughout the government and I think through USIS to the extent they could, certainly at the upper levels in the provinces and maybe even to district levels. Villagers, I suspect most of the villagers weren't even able to read in Lao. I know they weren't, as a matter of fact.

LC: Okay.

JM: So it was difficult to get this kind of information and knowledge down to the

very basic level in Laos other than by our visits to villages. That is another thing which I think I've already stressed in our interviews. I did a great deal of traveling out into the provinces down to the village levels by road or by plane or by helicopter. Almost invariably took Lao officials with me, usually from the top level of the ministry as well as lower-level officials so that my interface with the Lao government was very extensive indeed during the three years I was there.

LC: Yes. Absolutely. Yes.

JM: I am going to deal with going into some specifics in that respect, Laura.

LC: Excellent.

JM: The first trip of any consequence that I remember that I made into the provinces was with the ambassador, Bill Sullivan, and Prince Boun Oum. Now I've already mentioned Prince Boun Oum. I'll just remind you that he was the head of the southern Lao branch of the royal family and pretty much the feudal leader of all of southern Laos. He was the principal political figure in that [area of the] country. He was a tall, heavyset, burly man, rough and ready in his appearance and manner I should say. I think I've said that he had been a sergeant in the French army. He spoke absolutely fluent French, but with so much slang that he learned in the army that I had great difficulty in understanding his French, both for that reason and because he also lisped a bit, which made it doubly difficult. It was very interesting to watch him operate in the provinces. He was absolutely the antithesis of the Lao Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma. Souvanna Phouma was the kind of person—a very smooth aristocrat who was at home in diplomatic circles anywhere in the world, somewhat aloof, conducted his government in a very reserved manner, and really had no technique for getting down to the level of the villagers at all. Prince Boun Oum, on the contrary, with his rough and ready manner, his bluffness, his readiness to kid with and even tell dirty stories and jokes to the villagers went off beautifully. He could establish a perfect rapport with him whereas in diplomatic circles he was almost completely tongue-tied and gauche. So it was very interesting to see the contrast between these two leading political officials in Laos. What we did was visit [villages] in Khammouane province. Khammouane is the northernmost province of the southern region of Laos. Now, the principal towns in southern Laos are Savannakhet and Pakse. The provincial capital of

Khammouane is Thakhek, a considerably smaller place than either Savannakhet or Pakse. The villages we visited, some of them had just been recently recaptured from the communists, as a matter of fact. So we visited quite a number of these villages in one afternoon.

LC: Was this early on in your tour, Joe?

JM: No. I arrived in September and I think this was in October.

LC: Okay. Mm-hmm.

JM: We spent the afternoon doing this and then I think I stayed overnight in Thakhek, Khammouane province, because I was going to have lunch the next day with the provincial governor. He undoubtedly accompanied us on these visits to the provinces, but I had just met him and I was going to get further acquainted with him. But I awoke the next morning—well, let me say that in the villages we had to drink something called lao hai, which I think I've mentioned in these sessions before, which was a fermented rice drink, not a distilled one like lao lao, which I have said is so strong I think it killed all germs, whereas lao hai, being fermented and served in huge earthen jugs with bamboo straws passed around and as one drank un-boiled water was poured in to keep the jar topped up. This was my first experience with lao hai. The next morning when I woke up I felt quite miserable. I had to cancel my luncheon with the Lao governor and decided to return immediately to Vientiane by airplane. As a matter of fact with the severe abdominal pains I so worsened on the, I guess, about an hour's flight from there back to Vientiane that when I arrived at the airport in Vientiane, I guess because of word passed by the pilot of the airplane I was met at the airport by an ambulance and a stretcher. I really needed it at that point. I was in great misery. I was taken home and given by the German doctor at our American embassy dispensary given something. He diagnosed it immediately as amoebic dysentery. He gave me something that proved extremely effective because within a few hours I began to feel much better.

LC: Oh, goodness.

JM: I was virtually unconscious by the time we landed in Vientiane. I think Nonie was at the airport. They had notified her also.

LC: Oh, she must have been absolutely fit to be tied.

JM: Well, fortunately, though I had another bout of amoebic dysentery later

during my three years there, there were no permanent effects of that because we evidently got the bug sufficiently early that it didn't get into my liver. Amoebic dysentery is really a very serious disease if the bacteria succeeds in getting into one's liver. So I was fortunate in that respect, although one can have a pretty miserable short period of time even if that doesn't happen. Nonie and Penny, our oldest daughter, had had amoebic dysentery in Saigon also without any ulterior effects. So the whole family came out of this experience without any permanent effects, thank God.

LC: Well, yes. You're very lucky. This disease is something that attacked American servicemen during the deployments to Vietnam and also as I think back to World War II there were huge numbers of servicemen rendered unfit for their duties, whether combat or otherwise because of this disabling disease. It's just terrible to even hear about it.

JM: That's right.

LC: I feel sorry for you. Okay. I hope you get better here soon, Joe. Are you going to discuss your recovery? You felt better right away?

JM: I recovered rather quickly.

LC: Okay. I'm glad to hear that.

JM: Actually, more quickly, I think, than I recovered from the second bout later, but we won't get into that. Enough on that particular subject.

LC: Goodness gracious.

JM: Now I also want to proceed now to one of the earlier trips I made.

LC: If I may, Joe, can I just ask you to hold for a moment? I wanted to ask whether there were any negative repercussions from your having to cancel your luncheon with the governor.

JM: No. No. No.

LC: How was that handled?

JM: Oh, I don't remember specifically, Laura. I don't know whether I communicated. I may have even been staying with him, Laura, at his residence. I probably was. I know somewhat later both Nonie and I stayed with him in his residence. I might explain why. We made quite a number of trips to Khammouane province during our time there. One reason was our good Lao ministerial friend, Ngon Sananikone, held

his seat in the National Assembly from Khammouane province. So we even visited his electoral district down there. I remember one episode from that particular visit. We had lunch in a village in a Lao house with its bamboo floor and erected on stilts. Ngon produced ant's eggs, which is considered a great delicacy in Laos. I think I refused to sample them, but Nonie did so she got a taste of this rural Lao delicacy. That's one thing that I remember from that particular visit.

LC: Good for her.

JM: But what I was going to say about Thakhek, in particular hotel accommodations because in subsequent visits, at least the first two after this one which I had to cancel, we stayed at what was the leading hostelry in Thakhek. Now I think it had been in a better status when the French controlled Laos, but it had seriously deteriorated. It was small anyway. I think they had only eight or ten bedrooms, but you and I have both seen movies or read novels in which beds were festooned with cobwebs in abandoned houses.

LC: Indeed.

JM: This was literally true in this hotel. We went into the bedroom each of the two times we were there. The mosquito net had been pulled up to the top and the cobwebs were hanging down from the mosquito net to the bed.

LC: Lovely.

JM: Of course, when one brought the mosquito net down all kinds of stuff poured out of the net. The bathroom, the shower there I remember had a bare cement floor, had a barrel of water with a dipper in it. Of course, it was not a private bathroom. All this was the bathroom for all of the rooms in the hotel. So one just poured the dipper over himself and that's how we had a bath. After two visits with me to that hotel when we went another time Nonie said, "I am not staying at that hotel." I said, "Well, the governor has invited us to stay at his residence." So that's where we stayed the next time we went down to Khammouane. I thought I would just tell that story.

LC: Very, very interesting. Joe, Thakhek is located just across the river.

JM: Thakhek is on the Mekong, just as Savannakhet and Pakse are.

LC: Yes. Just across the river, if my map in my head is correct, is NKP (Nakhon Phanom), which later became a large U.S. base just on the Thai side of the river.

JM: What do you find on your map?

LC: Nakhon Phanom.

JM: Oh, yes. We also had—well, we had one opposite—well, Vientiane was not right at the crossing with Thailand. It was about, oh, ten or fifteen miles south of Vientiane. We had not directly on the Mekong, but about thirty kilometers beyond Udorn, which was also an important military base in Thailand. I think there was also an important American military base opposite Savannakhet. I can't remember the name of the Thai town there.

LC: I'm also not sure. I'm afraid I don't know that one. Did you on this trip or maybe other visits—perhaps this will come later—observe traffic either on the river that was for example the Thai police watercraft or anything like that?

JM: No. No. I'm not sure. I don't remember ever seeing any Lao patrolling of the Mekong. Our house in Vientiane, I think I've told you, was right on the Mekong River. Thailand was on the other side of the river so we looked right over into Thailand from our house. I don't remember ever in the time I was in Laos, either in Vientiane or in any of the provincial towns seeing any evidence of Lao patrol activity on the river whatsoever.

LC: Any activity by the Thais?

JM: No. I never noticed any activity by the Thai.

LC: Very interesting. Very, very interesting. Okay. I just thought I'd ask.

JM: Well, that's an interesting observation, Laura, as a matter of fact. It shows how easily that border could be crossed, right?

LC: Indeed. I think earlier there was some planning which maybe I could explore with you later for American forces to try to find some kind of line inside Thailand that if the Mekong was crossed, say, by the Pathet Lao forces or NVA—

JM: The North Vietnamese.

LC: Right. That the United States might have to actually deploy troops to hold the line for Thailand.

JM: Laura, while we're on this subject I might mention one thing which I haven't mentioned, I don't believe, in the process of these interviews. During the French Viet Minh war, which as you know, lasted from 1946 to 1954, quite a number of

Vietnamese communists took refuge. They crossed Laos and took refuge in northeastern Thailand. So that I can remember in the ’50s and early ’60s we often discussed this presence of a rather substantial Vietnamese communist group in northeastern Laos. They were estimated to be about forty thousand.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JM: Yeah. You may be aware of that, but we hadn’t gotten that into the record during the interview. So this was always something that was on the minds of the Americans and the Thai.

LC: Yes. It couldn’t be any other way, the potential for some kind of diversionary activity or something more serious there, certainly—

JM: Yeah. I really expected—I’m getting ahead of the game now—but I really expected in my mind after the fall of both South Vietnam and Laos to the communists that in view of this Vietnamese communist presence in northeastern Laos and the fact that the northeastern Thai are really more closely related to the Lao than to the Thai, that Hanoi would attempt to use these facts as a means of instigating rebellion in northeastern Thailand against the Thai government.

LC: That it did not happen is actually surprising.

JM: It did not happen. I think I even wrote an article on that at one point for one of the publications after I had retired. But fortunately, partly because there were some radio broadcasts after ’75, the communist radio broadcast which indicated they were thinking along these lines. Of course, this was exactly the kind of tactic Hanoi had used in South Vietnam and Laos and had been successful there. So I thought it might well be repeated in northeastern Thailand.

LC: Joe, just—

JM: As you say, fortunately it did not happen. I guess Hanoi was preoccupied with other things, pretty soon with Cambodia, as you well know.

LC: Indeed. Yes. Things deteriorated there for the Vietnamese.

JM: Right. So they’ve got their hands fuller than they expected in Cambodia.

LC: Yes, sir. They certainly did. Joe, it sounds again a theme that emerged as if Nonie was very willing to go on the trips and to be a part of some of this. She was very game.

JM: Oh, yes. She went on many of them and subsequent tours that we made. As a matter of fact, the next one, I'm not sure she was on this next one. I don't think so. The trip I made with the Lao minister of finance, Sisouk na Champassak, and the Lao minister of planning, I think his name was—anyway, oh, his name is Suryadhay or something like that was his surname. Oh, Inpeng Suryadhay. I always called him Inpeng so I should remember his first name. I went with these two younger Lao ministers on a trip into Sayaboury province, the province west of Vientiane across the Mekong from Vientiane. I think we also touched on Houa Khong province and we also went to Luang Prabang province. This was my first trip with these two young Lao ministers who were, to a degree, competitors for the succession to Souvanna Phouma when he should decide to turn over the prime-ministership. It was very interesting to see the two operate in the provinces. Inpeng was I think the more effective at the village level. He knew how to get down to the level of the villagers or was able to get down to the level of the villagers better than Sisouk was. But Inpeng's trouble was that he drank heavily and this was evident almost from the outset of my association with him. It got worse as time passed. He was often quite bleary-eyed and sometimes not even quite coherent. So this of course at the higher levels of politics in Laos certainly was a factor against his political career. Whereas Sisouk who was also, I think, related to—yeah, I think he was related to Boun Oum since he came from southern Laos. So his last name Champassak—Champassak was the southernmost province of Laos.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: So Sisouk's family was closely connected with Boun Oum's. Sisouk was much more effective at the governmental and diplomatic level than Inpeng was. As a matter of fact, he was generally looked at in Laos as the potential successor to Souvanna Phouma. He had very good relations with Souvanna and I think was generally considered among the abler officials of the ministers of the government. So I found it interesting watching these two operate out at the provinces.

LC: Since, Joe, you mentioned their relations with Souvanna Phouma, and particularly that of Sisouk na Champassak. Can you say something about Prince Boun Oum and his relations with Souvanna Phouma?

JM: I don't think they were ever very close, for one reason of course. In the

tripartite conflict in Laos, what, in ’60 and ’61 when Prince Boun Oum became the prime minister, Souvanna Phouma and his neutralists were then allied with the communists. Though relations were eventually patched up in a sense between these two opposing political figures as a result of the Geneva Conference on Laos they certainly were never close at all. They were not only utterly different in personalities, but they’ve had this differing political experience. I don’t think either regarded the other with any degree of esteem at all.

LC: Was there any potential for their supporters to kind of compete within the government while you were there? Did you observe that?

JM: Not so much while I was there. I might mention that Boun Oum’s only official position with the government, I think he was designated the Inspector General of the Army. I think that was his title.

LC: Okay.

JM: No, but Laura, not long before I got to Laos, about six months before, General Phoumi, P-H-O-U-M-I, who was from Savannakhet, a southerner, had tried to mount a *coup d’état* against Prince Souvanna Phouma. There was fighting in Vientiane which led to a certain degree of destruction and certainly Phoumi’s house was burned down among other things. The U.S. government sided with Souvanna Phouma. Phoumi eventually, not eventually—Phoumi failed in his coup attempt and went into exile in Thailand and never came back to Laos while I was there and I doubt came back at any subsequent time. I don’t remember any particular evidence that Boun Oum was connected with this *coup d’état*, but since Phoumi originated from Boun Oum’s area, I think this was probably certainly a suspicion in Souvanna Phouma’s mind.

LC: Okay. Was there any—

JM: That would be my answer to your question that you just raised. I don’t remember any particular subsequent indications of dissension within the Lao governmental ranks between Souvanna Phouma supporters and Phoumi supporters. As a matter of fact, the feeling that Souvanna Phouma generally favored Sisouk as his successor and since Sisouk was from the south, from Boun Oum’s area it would indicate that at least the relations had been sufficiently smoothed over that Souvanna Phouma envisaged a southerner as his eventual successor.

LC: Would Souvanna Phouma as prime minister have had any kind of diplomatic difficulty with Thailand because they had accepted General Phoumi's presence there after the coup attempt?

JM: I don't recall any particular evidence of that sort, but Souvanna Phouma like all Lao, I think, had a residual suspicion of both the Thai and the Vietnamese because they had been the two principal traditional enemies of Laos and were always trying to—the Lao felt were always trying to impinge on its sovereignty and even take over territory. There had been wars, for example, between Thailand and Laos over Sayaboury province, the province west of the Mekong.

LC: That was one of the things that had to be repaired after World War II, if I remember.

JM: I think so because I think during the Japanese occupation of Thailand, Sayaboury province was detached from Laos and attached to Thailand, I believe as I recall.

LC: I think that's right, Joe. Yeah. Well, it's a very helpful background. Well, you were going to tell a little perhaps about this trip.

JM: I was discussing this trip with Sisouk and Inpeng. I'm going to diverge for a moment and say I think during this trip was the first time that I met Hom Sundara who was the provincial governor of Luang Prabang province.

LC: Can you spell his name, Joe?

JM: Yeah. H-O-M and second part S-U-N-D-A-R-A. I mention this because he was probably the most important of the provincial governors because Luang Prabang was the seat of the, the royal seat of the king.

LC: Yes.

JM: So that, I think, was generally considered the top most provincial governorship. I had many subsequent experiences with Hom Sundara. We generally got along quite well, as I remember. A number of lunches at his residence when I was visiting Luang Prabang were very cordial. But he also—I'll tell you a couple of interesting incidents.

LC: Yes please.

JM: One of my subsequent visits and I remember this was at lunch at his

residence, Hom who never was reticent about asking me for assistance from the AID mission for anything he had in mind, came up with some request I don't recall for what now, which didn't appeal to me at all. So I turned it down politely. He said, "Oh, well, then if you're not going to do it I'm going to have to ask the Russians to do it." I said, "Please go right ahead and do so," which took him back and that settled that issue. It was a bluff on his part, but interesting that he would ask so directly and make no bones about it.

LC: Indeed. Well, you called him on it.

JM: Yeah, right.

LC: Nicely done.

JM: That was an interesting incident and then there was another one. A bridge across a tributary of the Mekong, a smaller tributary, which connected Luang Prabang's city with its airport, was carried away by a flood on this tributary. USAID had replaced the bridge with a Bailey bridge.

LC: Which is?

JM: We were up there for the inauguration of this Bailey bridge and you'll be surprised at the number of people who were there for what in some ways in any other country would be considered an unimportant event. The ambassador was there and Eugene Black, who was president of the World Bank, was there also. He happened to be in Laos at that point and was in Vientiane more to make a courtesy visit on the king. So he was at that ceremony as well.

LC: Incredible.

JM: Yeah, but the really interesting thing to me, Laura, was that during, I guess as we were waiting for that ceremony to start, Hom Sundara, the provincial governor came up to me in an extremely agitated fashion, so agitated that I had trouble understanding what he was raising for a while. I finally understood. He said, "You've got to do something about this bridge because the evil *pi* in the river"—P-I, which are the evil spirits in Lao thinking—"of the river are going to carry that bridge away unless you do something to appease them." He said, "They need to be able to get over that bridge as they descend the river." So I agreed to have a rope ladder made, a simple rope ladder down each side of the bridge to the water level so the *pi* could climb up that

ladder, go over the bridge and down the other side so that nothing would happen to the bridge. Now, if I had asked Washington for approval of this weird project or if it had ever reached the levels of Congress my name would probably have been mud. But at least it conformed with the Lao mythology and had that bridge been carried away in a future flood I would have been totally to blame in the Lao mind because I hadn't financed a very small amount of money to finance this rope ladder on each side of the bridge.

LC: Well, Joe, this is such a clear demonstration of how you really, as a representative of the U.S. government, had to be flexible in all ways at all times.

JM: Fortunately, we had sufficient flexibility in the operation of the AID mission we could do small things like that as well as much bigger things that even the mission in Vietnam couldn't do because it didn't have the capability that I've described to you before that I had in the Public Works Division of the AID mission.

LC: Well, it's a very interesting story. It's very, very good. Was Hom then calmed by your response?

JM: Oh, yes. It satisfied him. He thought this was a great idea. This satisfied him completely.

LC: That was a pretty good catch there, Joe, I think.

JM: Laura, you may want to terminate at this point because we've been going for about forty minutes.

LC: Okay. I think I will and thank you very much.

JM: The same visit Bill Sullivan took me to call on the king, which I won't say was the only time I ever saw him, but this was my first official call. I saw him later at some celebrations at the royal residence. The king—well, I can put this on the record. The king was not a terrifically impressive figure at all. He was a pretty big man for a Lao, but in his conversation he never came across very impressive. I remember Bill Sullivan said to me when he was taking me for the visit, he said, "There's a certain protocol in how you address the king. You don't do it by using the '*vous*' in French." We all talked in French, of course. "You do it sort of in third person." It was rather difficult for an American to talk to an individual and do it directly to him using the third person. One has to be rather careful, especially in a foreign language.

LC: Joe, where did you actually see him? Were you received in a kind of formal line?

JM: Probably at the royal residence. I suspect his office was in the residence, too, but I think it was probably there, Laura. But anyway, I better let you go, my dear, and not keep entertaining you with anecdotes.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [47] of [57]
Date: September 15, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech. I am happy to be able to continue the interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall today. It's the fifteenth of September 2006. I am in Lubbock. Ambassador Mendenhall is speaking as he usually does very kindly from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thank you for your time today again, Joe. Of course, you know I appreciate it. Joe, can you pick up the story that we were discussing last week?

JM: I think so, Laura.

LC: Thank you.

JM: We were in the process of discussing my relations with the Lao and specifically when we terminated the last time various provincial trips into the provinces with Lao officials. So I'll resume right there.

LC: Very good.

JM: The next trip that I thought was worth mentioning was one that was made to Sayaboury province, that province which is west of the Mekong in northern Laos, with the minister of public works who was also minister of the economy, Ngon Sananikone, the minister of finance, Sisouk na Champassak. This time both ministers brought their wives along and I brought Nonie. The minister of finance had a French wife, as I think I have mentioned before, who was usually not in Laos. I think she resisted living there, but she happened to be at that point. She quite willingly joined this adventure out into the provinces. She was a very pleasant individual. Incidentally, she subsequently divorced Sisouk and married the man who was the French ambassador to Laos during much of the time that we were there.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: Yeah. Well, he had a Chilean wife who was extremely unusual. She was very outspoken and quite un-French in her conduct. We rather liked her, as a matter of fact, whereas he was sort of a typical French diplomat. I think he even rose to become

the third or fourth highest official in the Qaai d'Orsay, the French foreign office. At that time I think Sisouk's French ex-wife was the wife of that high French official. Anyway, she was with us on this trip, as was, as I indicated, Ngon Sananikone's wife. We knew her well at that point. We came to know her quite well subsequently although she spoke no French or English. Since we did not speak Lao we had some problem, of course, in communicating with her, but her husband Ngon spoke perfect French. He had gone to high school in a French high school in Hanoi since there were no high schools in Laos at that point of time under the French protectorate. His French was so good he sometimes would laughingly correct my French, particularly my French "u." Now do you know French, Laura?

LC: I used to.

JM: Well, anyway, I remember when I was in college the head of the department of modern languages who was also the professor of French used to say, "The French 'u' you say an American 'e' but you round your lips and then you've got the French 'u.'" Well, I've always remembered that, but I sometimes have trouble applying that in the middle of words. My French "u" which should be "oo" and I always often came out as "ee" rather than "oo." My good friend Ngon Sananikone used to laugh at me and he would imitate my French. I took this in good grace because his French was so good, very good in fact.

LC: Well, I think it was probably delivered with good grace as well.

JM: Oh, it was indeed. He would always laugh when he did it. Well, anyway, we stopped in the provincial capital of Sayaboury to pick up the provincial governor who was a half-brother of the king, a man whom we came to like very much. We saw him rather frequently, but he'd had great tragedies with his family. I think all his children were born with some kind of defect. I'm not sure what it was now, like semi-paralytic or something, a rather grave defect. But despite this personal tragedy of his he was always a very pleasant individual when we were associated with him. Anyway, we picked him up in the provincial capital and flew into an isolated valley in the northern part of that province called Hong Sa, H-O-N-G, second word S-A. Our Public Works Division, which I've mentioned a number of times, with our very practical man, Tom Cole, in charge of it, had built a road from this previously totally isolated valley out to the

Mekong. So there was some means of egress at the valley. We were there to inaugurate the completion of this road. I think Tom Cole and his wife were also with us on this trip. We stayed overnight in the schoolhouse in this valley which USAID had built. I remember I think it was a single-room schoolhouse. In any case I remember men and women all slept together in the same room. We had taken cots with us, mosquito nets, I suppose sheets and blankets. In any case, the divider between the men and women consisted of army blankets hung on a wire, which sort of reminded me of a very famous movie, Laura, long before your day, but maybe you've heard of it, a 1934 movie *It Happened One Night* starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert.

LC: Yes, sir.

JM: I think he picked her up as a hitchhiker and they were forced to spend a night I think in a motel room. I think they had a blanket hanging between them. At one point as the movie put it, the walls of Jericho fell down. That was such a famous movie.

LC: Yes. It's a great movie.

JM: I think it won the Academy Award for the best movie of the year.

LC: I believe you're right.

JM: I believe it also won acting awards for both Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. In any case, this particular experience often reminded me of that movie of my youth. Another interesting thing about this overnight stay, the toilet facility was a bamboo hut on stilts, as Lao houses were. Once you got up there it simply had a hole in the bamboo floor for as the French say [FRENCH]. The bathing facilities consisted of a barrel of water with a dipper. The water just ran down through the—when you washed yourself it ran down through the bamboo onto the floor onto the ground. So this was a rather interesting way for those of us who are accustomed to a more civilized way of spending our nights, interestingly, of passing the night in this isolated valley. Anyway, that was very interesting. All of the wives took this with them with excellent grace. We all enjoyed ourselves very much and everybody was pleased with the road that had been built by USAID to the valley or to the river, rather.

LC: Was there a ceremony then?

JM: Oh, yes. We had a little ceremony inaugurating the road. I suppose Ngon Sananikone and I spoke. I have no specific recollection of that. He and I spoke at a

number of these ceremonies of inauguration. While we're talking about this particular totally isolated valley in the northern part of Sayaboury province I am reminded of another trip that I made to another semi-isolated valley in the same province, but farther west. Again, USAID built a road from that valley to the Mekong. I said semi-isolated because the only surface connection of that valley to the world was out to Thailand. That worried the Lao from a security standpoint, including the prime minister, they were very happy not only from an economic standpoint, but a security standpoint when we built a road that connected that valley to the Mekong. Now both of these roads fitted into our economic development program because in both valleys we were encouraging the increase of rice production through small self-help irrigation dams, through fertilizer and other measures, primarily because if they could produce a surplus of rice and get it out over these roads to the Mekong that rice could be floated down the Mekong to the Luang Prabang area, the royal capital, which was a rice-deficit area. I think I've mentioned this before.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: We also were encouraging an increase in rice production farther south in Sayaboury province and the improvement of road facilities from there to the Mekong for the very same reason. Because I think I have indicated only during the high water season, the monsoon rain season, could rice be shipped up river to Luang Prabang by surface. Otherwise, all rice needed to supply the deficit in that area had to be flown in. That, of course, was very expensive. What we were doing in these two valleys was very important from an overall national economic development policy point of view.

LC: Joe, had those roads been under planning or construction before you arrived?

JM: No, no, no. These were started during my time. As I said, they fitted into my I call it supreme emphasis on increasing rice production to try to get Laos back in to the position that it had been in earlier of self-sufficiency as far as the principal staple of the food of the country was concerned.

LC: I actually have a rather good map of northern Laos in front of me and I see Hong Sa.

JM: Xieng Lom is X-I-E-N-G, second word L-O-M. That is farther west. I don't know whether that would be on your map or not.

LC: It is indeed and both of them are shown—this is a 1967 map—as having airfields although I—

JM: We went in by air to both. I wouldn't call them airfields. They were dirt airstrips.

LC: They must have been a bit primitive.

JM: The trip that I made to Xieng Lom, I can't remember which Lao officials were with me other than one. That was the director of agriculture, Tiao, which is T-I-A-O, Somsavath, S-O-M-S-A-V-A-T-H. He was the young, personable director of agriculture, which fell within the Ministry of Economy under Ngon Sananikone. I came to know him extremely well and worked very closely with him, often took him on trips in connection with our agriculture development programs, liked him very much and considered him certainly one of the abler and more devoted Lao officials with whom I did work during the three years there.

LC: He, within the Lao governmental structure, reported to Ngon Sananikone?

JM: Yes. Exactly.

LC: So the Ministry of Agriculture therefore fell under a kind of super Ministry of the Economy?

JM: Well, there was no ministry of agriculture. He was director of agriculture.

LC: Director, I'm sorry.

JM: Which was farther down the bureaucratic line and he reported to Ngon as the minister.

LC: Were they politically allied as well?

JM: Well, I don't think Tiao Somsavath was actually—I never was aware that he was active politically in any sense. Tiao, I think either he or his wife was a lower--ranking member of the royal family in some sense, but it never showed as far as he was concerned. He was a very down-to-earth individual, always excellent in man-to-man talks and negotiations.

LC: This area that you're talking about that's north of Sayaboury and the entire province is one that's come up a couple of different times. Can you talk about the security situation there as distinct from the events that were happening in northeastern Laos?

JM: Yes. Well, parts of the province were not totally secure. That was particularly true in the northern part of the province. I don't recall any incidents in these two valleys, but there were a lot of mountains in that area and certain of those areas were considered quite insecure. Something that I was going to mention later, Laura, when we get to it this morning is the disappearance of a plane under contract to us between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai, which is the capital of Houa Khong province, the northwestern most province north of the Mekong, which I'm sure you can see on your map, too.

LC: Indeed. Indeed. We can come along to that.

JM: I'll discuss this right now since you raised the question.

LC: Okay.

JM: This was a Dornier airplane, which was I think a German manufacturer. We had quite a number of them in Laos because they were very excellent for short take-off and landing strips, which it's obvious that we had plenty of them in Laos. It was also a plane that Nonie, I remember, didn't like flying in them very much because it had a huge bubble front and she felt insecure looking down at the ground. She liked looking down at the ground from helicopters, which really are more dangerous than airplanes, but she's always felt very insecure in a Dornier, whereas I like the Dorniers because I could see my AID projects on the ground very easily as we flew in. Anyway, this Dornier took off, I guess, late one afternoon from Luang Prabang, the royal capital, to go to Ban Houei Sai with I think six people aboard plus the pilot or maybe he was included in the six. It never reached Ban Houei Sai. Now on that plane were one of the higher officials of the International Voluntary Service, IVS, which I've mentioned quite a number of times.

LC: Yes.

JM: We had a lot of their volunteers scattered over Laos. I mentioned it as the private equivalent of the Peace Corps, which was actually funded by AID, by the AID administration. We had I think the number three supervisor of the AID volunteers was on this plane. I had just a few weeks before stood in, I think, as best man to his wedding. He was aboard it as was the Luang Prabang representative of the United States Information Service. I think the rest who were aboard as passengers were Lao, I believe. These were the two Americans. Anyways, I—

LC: Can you give their names, Joe, just for the record in case you recall?

JM: I can't remember their names, Laura.

LC: If they come to you that'll be fine.

JM: I don't think I have a record of that really.

LC: Okay. That's fine. That's fine.

JM: In any case, the plane was never found and actually the head of the U.S. Information Service in Vientiane, Dave Sheppard, whom I knew extremely well, after this disappearance of the plane, rented one of our airplanes for two days, flew at a low level over much of that area between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai to try to find whether he could find any wreckage or what had happened. Incidentally, his plane was fired on a number of times and I think it even took some minor hits to the extent that he finally had to cease and desist his search mission. That indicates that that area was not totally secure. We never really knew whether the plane had been shot down by the communists or whether it had gone down for some other reason. There was some indication, not definitive, but some indication that a seventh person may have been aboard, which would have overloaded the plane. So that could have been the cause of its disappearance. We never did know the answer to that one.

LC: Roughly when did this occur, Joe? Do you have a sense of that?

JM: Oh, I think it would have certainly been '66 or '67. I'm not sure which, Laura.

LC: Interesting.

JM: Anyway, that's my story of those two valleys which were important to our Economic Development Program.

LC: As you've mentioned on the second one at Xieng Lom there was some sense that the only outlet being to Thailand, and it sits very close to the Thai border, was perceived as a problem.

JM: The Lao government from the prime minister down didn't particularly like that because there was always a latent mistrust among the Lao of both the Thai and the Vietnamese because historically both of these larger countries had engaged in aggression against Laos. So the Lao with their historical memory always had a bit of a mistrust of both of these countries. The fact that this valley, prior to our construction of the road,

had only an outlet to Thailand, was not a very active concern but of residual concern to the Lao.

LC: So it was important for several reasons then to get this road constructed.

JM: Exactly. Right.

LC: Well, continue on, Joe, if you would.

JM: Okay, Laura. The next trip I'd like to mention is one into the northwesternmost province, Houa Khong. This one also was with my good friend, Ngon Sananikone, the minister of public works because the primary purpose of this—well, this trip had two primary purposes. One was, as I recall, to inaugurate the air strip in the capital of that province, Ban Houei Sai which had been reconstructed by Tom Cole within six weeks after the old airport had been swept away by the great flood of 1966 of the Mekong. As I think I've indicated, that airport, which was also non-paved as anything we did in Laos was in the way of transportation, was actually jet-able. That is, jets could land on it and take off, although that rarely occurred in Laos simply because there was a slope in the middle of the runway which was used to slow down planes landing and to accelerate planes taking off.

LC: Sure.

JM: Anyway, we went there to inaugurate the completion of that strip. The other purpose of that trip was to visit the chief of the second biggest tribal minority group in Laos, the biggest being of course the Meo in the northeast who are usually referred to today as the Hmong, H-M-O-N-G. I'm not sure I remember the name of the second biggest group. I think it was very similar. I think it was Mao, but I'm not sure of that, Laura. Anyway, I remember the name of the head of that tribal group was Tiao Ma, simple M-A, Tiao being a title. Anyway, we decided to visit him at his tribal headquarters. We flew in on our C-47, which was not a big plane as you know. The C-47's equivalent of a DC-3, a small plane. But to land at that particular airstrip the pilot immediately upon landing had to throw the propellers into reverse in order to be able to stop on the short runway.

LC: Goodness.

JM: I had failed to brief Ngon Sannankione and the others on the plane that this would happen. The moment we touched down when those propellers were thrown into reverse the airplane began to shake violently as though it was going to fall apart. So the Lao were quite alarmed. My good friend Ngon furiously jumped up and said, "What are you doing?" I very quickly got him quieted down, but it was my fault for not telling them beforehand because I had been forewarned about that. Again, I think Nonie was on this trip with us. The principal thing I remember about that visit was we had lunch that Taio Ma provided. He had the more attractive young women of his tribe circulating among all the luncheon guests with rather large shot glasses of scotch, scotch whisky. Incidentally, Laura, Nonie and I learned something last night from a travel log on the TV Travel Channel and that is that scotch whiskey from Scotland is spelled without the "e" in "whiskey." We never realized that before. We rushed out to our liquor cabinet, got out the scotch bottle and sure enough that's the case.

LC: Truly?

JM: You didn't know it either, did you?

LC: No. No. Not at all.

JM: Even at our old age we're still learning.

LC: There you go.

JM: We learned this last night. Anyway, these young ladies were passing around the table constantly with these large shot glasses of scotch, expecting the guests to drink them. I took some, but pretty soon I realized that if I continued I was going to pass out completely. Well, when I or others became a bit resistant these young ladies would try to pour it down the throat. They were so insistent with me that I finally had to get mad and lose my temper. That succeeded in stopping it to the embarrassment of everybody a bit, but it did prevent me from passing out, which would have been even worse than losing my temper I think.

LC: I think you're right.

JM: Anyway, that was a sort of memorable visit to Tiao Ma for the reason I just mentioned. I don't remember anything of any substantive importance, but at least we visited him and made his acquaintance. I think CIA worked quite closely with him in that area. He was the principal tribe.

LC: Again looking at the map, Joe, there's a notation on this map, which is just a National Geographic map for Bon Houei Sai, which says in parenthesis next to it "Fort Carnot." Does that ring a bell at all?

JM: Fort Carnot?

LC: Yes. C-A-R-N-O-T.

JM: That must've been a French word. No. I never heard that term while I was there. You said that was next to Ban Houei Sai?

LC: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

JM: Well, I suppose that was the term the French used for that particular capital. It was just a fairly large village is what it was. It wasn't much of a capital.

LC: Does it sit up high above—how is it situated? Do you remember at all?

JM: It's right on the Mekong because as I indicated the airstrip was swept away by the flood of '66. Laura, I can't really remember anything about this.

LC: That's okay. I just wondered.

JM: There were probably a few western-type structures which the French had left there and which were used by the provincial authorities, but that was fairly typical in some of these small provincial capitals. But it was certainly not what you and I would think of as a capital today of a state or a province.

LC: It's certainly in a remote area.

JM: That's right.

LC: That's for sure. Right up where—

JM: But CIA did operate a bit up in that area. Now, another trip I want to the same province, Houa Khong, I think I have mentioned this before. Leuam Insisiengmay who was the deputy prime minister and the minister of education, came from Savannakhet province, one of the principal provinces in southern Laos. He said to me one time, "I would like to go with you if you'll agree the next time you go up to Houa Khong province because," he said, "I've never been there." I said, "Sure, fine." I thought it was rather interesting that the number two in the Lao government was asking an American to take him to one of the provinces in his country that he had never seen, but I liked Leuam very much. Leuam was an interesting figure. He was quite shy, somewhat enigmatic, but very pleasant to work with. I think I'd mentioned him in connection with

the fact that he lost both of his sons in the fight against the communists, one directly in combat with the communists. He was a first lieutenant in the Lao army. The other son who joined the Lao air force lost him in an accident.

LC: I think we did discuss—

JM: Of course it is a real tragedy to a Lao as it is to many cultures to lose all of the sons in the family.

LC: I think we discussed that earlier in the context of your pointing out that many senior officials' sons did participate in the anti-communist war.

JM: Right. To a greater degree, I think, than I am aware in Vietnam as a matter of fact.

LC: That would be an interesting comparative study. I suppose you may be right.

JM: Yeah. In any case, I took Leuam on this trip and Keo Viphakone who was the secretary of state for rural development. The secretary of state was not quite as high as a minister, but almost. He participated in the Cabinet. I've mentioned Keo a number of times, I think.

LC: Yes.

JM: Keo was a very voluble individual, very gregarious. He and I had engaged in a number of arguments, as I think I've indicated earlier. He subsequently became the Lao ambassador to Paris and remained when the communists took over which caused all of his old Lao friends who had had to flee the communist takeover in Laos to break off relations with him. That may have occurred. As I think I have mentioned, this before because Keo's wife I think was the sister of the number one or number two Lao Communist. I think his name was Phoumi Vongvichit. I think that was the one who was the brother of Keo's wife, but we knew Keo's wife also.

LC: So the sister—

JM: Keo was on this trip with Leuam to Houa Khong province. You wanted to ask me something?

LC: I was just going to confirm that Keo's wife was Phoumi Vongvichit's sister.

JM: Yeah. As I recall, Laura. I know she was the sister of a high Lao communist official and I think that was the one.

LC: Okay.

JM: Yeah. I could be wrong on that point. It may have been another one. The more I think about it may not have been the sister of Phoumi Vongvichit. So I wouldn't swear to that, Laura.

LC: Okay. We won't hold you to that.

JM: In any case, the greatest interest to me of this trip with Leuam and Keo was our visit to quite a number of tribal areas. I have never seen such great diversity among peoples, certainly among tribal peoples, than Laos. This would have been an anthropologist's paradise to study these people. We saw tall people, short people. We saw original hippies. We saw original miniskirts. We saw bare-breasted ladies. The differences in dress in customs among these people was absolutely amazing. It seemed to go from A to Z. We were just visiting them for a few minutes each time as we hopped from area to area.

LC: Now, which region was this, Joe?

JM: Excuse me?

LC: Which region was this?

JM: This was in Houa Khong province. I would say we were probably about a third or a half of the distance from Ban Houei Sai, which is the southernmost part of the province to the northernmost part which was under communist control. Because we had lunch, as I think I've mentioned before, in the Golden Triangle area—the Golden Triangle area being the point where Laos, Thailand, and Burma meet and I think that's roughly halfway up the province of Houa Khong. You can probably tell from your map.

LC: Yes. I think that's accurate.

JM: That was generally the area we visited. It was an absolutely fascinating area to visit.

LC: Gosh, I can imagine. Wow.

JM: The other thing I can remember about that trip—and Laura, all these are so long ago these are just sort of isolated memories, but this one we were taking off, I guess, from the last tribal area. We took off from the airstrip there. After we took off, the pilot swept in low over the airstrip at a tremendous speed, which scared the hell out of all of us. The prime minister turned white because we thought we were crashing. What the pilot was doing was simply buzzing those tribal people to give them a thrill, but as soon

as I realized what was happening—can you hear me all right?

LC: Oh, yes.

JM: I think the telephone slipped from my ear a bit. As soon as I realized what was happening I rushed up to the pilot and gave him an earful of my mission directorial authority about engaging in this silly maneuver which so frightened us, including particularly the deputy prime minister. So that's the other thing that I remember about that trip, Laura. I don't think Nonie was with us on that trip. Oh, another thing that I think I remember about that trip, I think because of shortage of time we did not stop—excuse me—in Ban Houei Sai and pick up the provincial governor, which left him quite annoyed about the fact that we'd been in his province without picking him up. I think the next time I saw him he let me have it because he blamed me and not the Lao officials for failing to stop to pick him up. It was simply a question of time. There wasn't sufficient time if we were going to see very much in that province to stop in Ban Houei Sai and pick him up, too. As you know, any landing of an airplane takes time.

LC: Well, Joe, when you say he let you know he wasn't very happy—

JM: Yes, the Lao officials, they never were too reticent about letting me know how they felt about things I did.

LC: Diplomatically, of course, you have a burden to bear as well. You can't just kind of blow your stack.

JM: Not usually although as I've indicated to you Keo Viphakone and I sometimes got down hot and heavy. I think I mentioned this, but one time when Ngon figuratively stepped between us to stop the argument in which we were engaged. Anyway, I always got along very well with Keo. There was never any real problem. I liked him though he was never hesitant about asking us at the AID mission to do things for the Lao—

LC: Well, that's probably—that trust—

JM: Sometimes I thought to an excessive degree, which was usually the basis of our argument. Anyway, those were the trips to the Houa Khong province. Now another trip that I remember, Laura, since you've got your map there, was a visit to Paklay, P-A-K-L-A-Y, one word, which is the southernmost district in Sayaboury province. You can probably find that on your map, too. This was a district which had no surface connection

other than, I guess, via the Mekong in season to the rest of Laos. We flew in there. I was with—I had Ngon Sananikone and I remember also the director of agriculture, Tiao Somsavath, because we were working to increase rice production in that isolated area also. We spent a day in that isolated district. The thing I remember about that visit, and this is not very substantive, but after our inspections we settled down to our picnic lunch which we had brought with us on this occasion. This was fairly close, I think, to the end of my three years in Laos. I think Nonie was with me that day. We had resorted on some of these day trips to taking a gallon of whiskey sours with us because the Lao enjoyed them very much. We had quite a number of Lao officials with us, but we had our cocktails before lunch and then ate our picnic lunch. Pretty soon Lao officials were sacked out, I would say almost knocked out, all over the place as they took their post-luncheon siestas. That indicates how much they enjoyed an American whiskey sour. This is, I think, one of the main memories I take away from that trip, but we were engaged in serious agriculture development in that district, I hasten to add.

LC: Yes, of course. That area is also lying right along the stretch of the Mekong?

JM: Exactly. I don't think Paklay itself as I recall was right on the Mekong, but I don't think it was too far from it.

LC: Not too far. When you would have a lunch like this what kind of structure would you be at or would it be in the open?

JM: No. Since Laos is tropical and hot we would be under a roof somewhere. In the tropics you don't eat your lunch out in the hot sunshine.

LC: So you would have tried to find maybe a building on stilts or something?

JM: We were in the district village. So obviously we found some place where and I'm sure the district chief joined us for lunch because we would have contacted him immediately there.

LC: Out in an isolated area like this in a district town, would you have found the local district chief able to speak French in these cases?

JM: I think in some cases yes and in some cases no, Laura.

LC: It varied.

JM: I don't think all of them did speak French. The province chiefs, everyone I encountered did, but I can't distinctly remember. I'm sure not all the district chiefs

would have.

LC: But it sounds like they all spoke whiskey sours. So that was—

JM: Exactly. That they can understand very well.

LC: Well, please continue, Joe, if you have another episode in mind.

JM: Well, another trip that I remember that we made which had an interesting incident was one to which we were invited by the Lao ambassador, excuse me, Australian ambassador and his wife who were very good personal friends of ours. Australia had a small aid program. Australia was an important contributor to the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund that balance of payment foreign exchange stabilization fund that I've mentioned.

LC: Yes.

JM: Aside from that the Australians had some aid projects. Barrie Dexter, the ambassador, wanted to show us one of their agricultural projects in, as I recall, the northern part of Vientiane province. So we went up with him and his wife and some Lao officials to visit that project. I think it was one that was testing various grasses that could be acclimated to production in Laos. In any case, the thing that I particularly remember about that after visiting the project we were on our way back to—I imagine we went there by road. Anyway, we were going through a field where the grass was fairly high and all of a sudden General Kouprasith Abhay, one of the principal Lao military officers, grabbed Judith Dexter and grabbed her so she wouldn't move forward at all. As she looked down a snake slithered away and he said to her—and she was wearing simply open sandals—he said to her, "Had you put your foot down on that snake you would have lasted only a few minutes." So that has always stuck with me, as I'm sure you can remember very well.

LC: Oh, that sounds frightening. Yes.

JM: Incidentally, we are still in touch with Barrie Dexter, the Lao ambassador, via email messages. His wife unfortunately died, I think some time last year I believe it was. So they remained very close friends of ours even after our service in Laos.

LC: Did their stay there parallel your own? In other words they were there—

JM: More or less. They left shortly before we did. He was transferred.

LC: Do you know where he went?

JM: Let me just think, Laura. I think he went back to Canberra and became the head of the agency in the Australian government in charge of Aborigine affairs and had a rather difficult time because as I'm sure you're aware a lot of Australians resent the programs, which have been inaugurated by the Australian government, to benefit the Aborigines.

LC: It's a very complicated situation.

JM: I suppose a parallel in the U.S. is the Affirmative Action program here the way there was real division within Australian as there is here over this program favoring minorities. So he—Barrie had some very difficult experiences including, I think, threats at time.

LC: I believe that. Yes.

JM: Yeah. He held that office for quite some years in the government of—let me see if I can remember the—I think the last name was G-O-U-G-H, as Australian prime minister, I believe. Anyway, it was a Labor government. This guy was fairly far to the left and no friend of the United States. I think his first name was Whitlam, W-H-I-T-L-A-M. Since he was so I felt anti-American I usually called him "Witless," a play on his name. Anyway, Barrie served that government in the office I've indicated and then subsequently he became the ambassador to Yugoslavia, the Australian ambassador to Yugoslavia and then the high commissioner to Canada. I think I've indicated when he was ambassador to Yugoslavia he and his wife used to come over and visit us from time to time. We would go to operas together because they were also opera fans. We also visited them once during the time he was high commissioner in Canada. We visited them in Ottawa.

LC: Very interesting career. He sounds like a very interesting guy.

JM: He is, a very fine person whom we like very much personally and valued from a professional standpoint.

LC: Truly, yes.

JM: So, Laura, I think that's about it on the trips I wanted to mention. We made a number of others, but I think I've hit the ones that I remember pretty well.

LC: Well, this is most interesting because it's such a remote area to have any kind of information about what you saw and what was interesting to you while you were

there is extremely useful really, Joe.

JM: I wanted to mention while we're talking about this, I think I may have mentioned this in some previous sessions with you, too. In this, I think was the summer of '67, Pop Buell, the old Indiana farmer who was our chief representative of the AID mission in northeastern Laos, came to me at one point and said, "My two American girls"—and this was not done in any pejorative way at all. He was extremely fond and valued them very highly. One was an American nurse who worked with his Meo nurses and the other was his secretary.

LC: Yes.

JM: They were assigned to this remote area in northeastern Laos where there were certainly no American amenities, entertainment or what have you. He came to me and said, "These two girls need a vacation out of the country for a while." I said, "Well, I well understand it." He said, "I don't know what to do about letting them go because I don't know what kind of replacement." So somehow he or I interested Nonie and our oldest daughter, Penny, who was then eighteen, I think, in going up to that area for a week, Nonie to mother his Meo nurses and Penny to act as his secretary. I think I've mentioned this to you before.

LC: Yes. You did. You did tell a little bit about this.

JM: Yeah. They were up there for a week. One of the things they remember about this was that every night when they went to the mess hall for dinner, Pop had them accompanied by a Meo guard with a rifle because the communists were only a few miles away. He was always concerned about the possibility of snipers firing into the main USAID area in that area of Sam Thong, S-A-M, second word T-H-O-N-G. Anyway, Nonie and Penny have always looked back on this as a great experience, as one of the highlights of their lives, the week they spent up there.

LC: What did you make of it, Joe, before it was agreed upon?

JM: Well, you know, I had come concern from a security standpoint about sending my wife and daughter up into that area, but we often had to balance security concerns with what shall I say, duty or what have you in Laos.

LC: It was really a bit more than that, though, because they were quite keen to do this. It wasn't really out of only a sense of duty it sounds to me like.

JM: It was an interesting experience in life for them aside from being a duty, absolutely, Laura.

LC: Yeah. They wanted to kind of pitch in it sounds like.

JM: That's right.

LC: One can well understand that although were I you I think I would have been shaking in my boots down in Vientiane.

JM: I was a bit, but I was glad when they got back to Vientiane, I will have to say frankly.

LC: Yes. I can imagine.

JM: While we're talking about Nonie, Laura, and trips I'll have to mention another one. This was again in an area of Sayaboury province. We had pretty important USAID activities in an area, oh, I would say about an hour south of the provincial capital there. I can't remember what that area was called now, but anyway, we made quite a number of trips in that area, which I've also mentioned at various contexts in the course of these interviews. This particular one I remember because elephants were brought in. Nonie was offered a ride on an elephant, which she had never done before. Incidentally I think I made my first ride on an elephant in that isolated valley of Hong Sa, from one Lao village to another about an hour.

LC: Well, I have to say I wish we had a picture of that.

JM: I think I may have mentioned one thing I learned on that particular elephant ride, Laura, was that when an elephant raises its front foot the hind foot always goes exactly in the spot where the front foot was as it moves along.

LC: Really? I had no idea.

JM: Yeah, just the little tidbits one picks up.

LC: You're full of these fascinating bits and pieces.

JM: Useless information, Laura.

LC: No. Well, I don't think so. I think it's quite interesting, actually.

JM: Anyway, Nonie boarded this elephant, if I may put it that way, by climbing up the ladder of a Lao house. As I've indicated, Lao houses were always on stilts and just walking out from the house to the back of the elephant and getting on, which is fine and very easy getting on. But then she took a ride and when she arrived at the destination

not too far away but some distance. The question was how to get off. Well, I guess the Indians call the guy who rides the elephant in front the mahout. Isn't that the word?

LC: I believe so.

JM: Anyway, he compelled the elephant to kneel down so that Nonie could get off more readily, but there was still a considerable distance. She landed on the ground with a very considerable thud. I was vastly amused at this whole thing and she was not amused at all because of my reaction. I said, "Well, there wasn't much I could do to help you off. I just had to watch you descend. That's all."

LC: She didn't appreciate the humor in that one.

JM: She didn't appreciate it at all, Laura.

LC: Well, she's certainly proven over the course of what you've said in previous interviews to be quite game and pretty much up for any challenge. So I guess maybe I'll have to side with her on this one.

JM: Now, Laura, I don't know whether you want to proceed or not. The next topic I was going to—related topic was dinners at our house with Lao officials and reciprocal meals at their houses.

LC: Maybe if you would, Joe, maybe tell the first one that you have and then perhaps we'll continue as soon as we can after this.

JM: Fine. Well, in any case we often entertained Lao at the very fine house, which I think I've indicated was rented for us as our official residence. Often for eighteen and even on our terrace facing the Mekong which was raised a bit above the garden. I think there were about three steps from the garden up to that terrace, which ran the whole length of the house facing the Mekong. I think we would have twenty-four people on that terrace for dinner. In any case, we often had Lao officials there. We were invited reciprocally to their houses. Sometimes they served us French food and sometimes Lao food. One of the things I remember particularly, often served to us when we were at Ngon Sananikone's house, was a Lao dish which I think they considered rather special for company, shall I put it that way, called khao poon. It was made with I think ground, better is probably grated fish. There were small bits of fish that were produced, I suppose, by grating in a pretty liquid sauce and usually served on rice. I don't think Nonie was too fond of it, but I learned to like it very well and ate it quite

often in Lao houses.

LC: Was it hot and spicy?

JM: Oh, the Lao, just as the Thai are, they are great consumers of hot peppers.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: I will mention this, Laura. I remember one time we offered American-style roast beef, again I think this was to Ngon Sananikone and other Lao guests. We noticed they seemed to be eating it without any great relish or enjoyment until we produced a big dish of hot peppers which they sprinkled on it. From that point on they really launched into it with both hands. Like the Thai, they prefer their food very hot, as you know. In a Thai restaurant here in the States you usually have to ask that it be made mild because the Thai tend to produce extremely hot food like the Indians because the Lao and the Thai are an Indian culture rather than a Chinese culture as far as daily life is concerned. I've gone into this before. The line in Indochina between Indian and Chinese culture, the Vietnamese being the Chinese, the Cambodians, the Lao, like the Thai and Burmese, are Indian culture.

LC: Right. One does see that crop up in these different ways such as food.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Yes. Exactly.

JM: Now, Laura, the one dinner or I should call this a dinner party because this was quite an elaborate affair at our house which we scheduled on my birthday in either '66 or '67, I suspect the latter, at which we invited Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Lao prime minister and his wife as the guests of honor. We had, I think, sixty or seventy people that time. Tables were set up in our garden, which was between that long house terrace I mentioned and the fence over the embankment looking down toward the Mekong. We even had a band there that evening seated on the terrace so that people could dance after dinner. I remember after quite some time two of the Lao leading generals took over the musical instruments from the band and played for the dancers. One was General Ouan Rattikone, who was the head of the Lao army and the other was General Kouprasith Abhay, who was one of the principal generals, a nephew [by marriage] of Ngon Sananikone. They played the instruments while others danced. We also had bridge tables set up inside because Prince Souvanna Phouma was an avid bridge

fan. So he played bridge after dinner the rest of the evening. As I recall, that party went on into the wee hours of the morning. That was the most elaborate affair that we offered during the time we were in Laos. Now I talked about being invited to Lao houses. I can remember being invited black tie—I think our affair that evening was black tie—we were invited black tie one evening to the prime minister's house with several other diplomatic officials. It wasn't for all of the heads of the diplomatic missions in Laos, but we had a very good dinner there. I remember Souvanna Phouma had returned from a recent trip to Paris. He presented certain of the ladies, including Nonie, whom he seemed to like a good deal, with cigarette lighters which he had bought in Paris. These were favors which he furnished to the ladies that evening. So at that point we had fine relations with Souvanna Phouma. Actually, I think one time when I was in the States on consultation Nonie was invited to the prime minister's for another dinner he was giving.

LC: He liked her.

JM: Yeah. We had various social experiences with him. I mention this because of something I'll go into the next time, which represents the reverse of what I've just been describing.

LC: Joe—

JM: Laura, at this point I think maybe we'll break it off.

LC: Very good.

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. Today is the twenty-second of September 2006. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall who is speaking by telephone from Nevada. Joe, if you would, I'd like us to continue our talk about meeting with Lao officials and so on as we were discussing last week.

Joseph Mendenhall: Right. Laura, I've been outlining the very satisfactory and satisfying relations that I enjoyed with Lao officials professionally in Vientiane, in travels with many of the ministers out in the provinces and in the countryside as well as socially, entertaining them and being entertained by them. Today I'm going to switch to the other side of the coin because particularly during the last few months of my tour in Laos in certain respects this relationship changed with certain of the officials. I'm going to start with a labor strike by AID mission Lao employees, the first labor strike in Lao history. There never had been one before. It happened when I was on a trip to southern Laos, to Pakse. I got word down there that the Lao employees of the AID mission were going on strike. So I rushed back to Vientiane. I immediately knew what the reason was. The chief administrative officers of the various U.S. agencies in Laos, the embassy, the AID [mission], the Information Service, the CIA, and I think the defense attaché's office were meeting over the issue of a rise in the salaries of the Lao employees. I had instructed the AID mission representative to oppose the increase in wages for this reason. The AID mission was the second biggest employer of labor in Laos. So obviously the impact on our budget would be greater than it would be for any of the other U.S. agencies in Laos, but even more important, I was very concerned that as the second biggest employer and one that was very evident to all the government officials in Vientiane, I was afraid that if we raised our salaries the Lao government would follow through with respect to its employees. It was the biggest employer in the whole country. That concerned me because if the Lao government raised the salaries of its employees that would increase its budgetary deficit, which would lead to increased demand for foreign exchange in the Foreign Exchange Stabilization Fund and an insistent request from the Lao government for more U.S. aid to that fund. So there was a very substantive reason why I felt it was not in the U.S. interest to adopt this wage increase. I rushed back by plane to Vientiane, met with the strike leaders. This was a rather un-Lao action on their part.

LC: Yes.

JM: The Lao are not very aggressive type of people. There happened to be a very forward Lao employee of the mission who had organized and was leading this. He was the spokesman for the employees in meeting with me. I however held to my position. I didn't change it despite the meeting with the Lao employees. Bill Sullivan, the ambassador, decided that the agencies in Laos should go ahead with the salary increase. I think he decided it for political reasons. When he made that decision I made my first and only resort during my three years in Laos to a provision in the regulations that if the representative of a U.S. agency in a foreign country, in this case Laos, was opposed to the ambassador's decision he could formally appeal it to Washington to the head of his agency. Despite my close relations with Bill Sullivan I decided to make this formal appeal. Bill Gaud, who was the administrator of the AID agency, the head of it, once he got my cable went to the undersecretary of state, the number two official in the State Department who was Nicholas Katzenbach, who had been the attorney general and had moved over to become the number two in the State Department under Dean Rusk. Gaud went over to take up my case with him. Well, Katzenbach's decision was, "We now have the big Tet Offensive in Vietnam so we really have enough on our hands without a labor strike in Laos, but I want you to tell Mendenhall that I admire his guts, but for the reasons indicated, I think I've got to come down on the other side." So I lost it, but I felt with a certain degree of gallantry and it certainly never affected my relations with Bill Sullivan adversely in any sense whatsoever, either professionally or personally. I don't think Bill ever even raised the question even in a kidding fashion subsequently.

LC: So the two of you never sort of sat down and discussed this?

JM: Excuse me?

LC: You two did not sit down and discuss this, you and the ambassador, you and Ambassador Sullivan?

JM: Well, I know we did because all cables went out over his signature, but I put a label on this cable "from Mendenhall" so Washington would know that though it went out over Bill Sullivan's signature this was from me and didn't represent his views.

LC: To what do you attribute his it sounds like fairly magnanimous position? I mean, because you were really contradicting his position.

JM: Yes. Well, I think he probably—I have no clear recollection of what reason he gave for it, but I think it must have been for political reasons, both with respect to maintaining good relations with the Lao employees on the part of the American mission and just in a general political sense. I don't know what other reason he could have had but the word got to the Lao employees at our mission that it was I who was holding this up because of the direct leak by the chief administrative officer of the embassy who was the leader in the fight for increasing the salaries of these employees. So it was he. He and I didn't have particularly good relations, as you can see, particularly since he leaked my opposition to the Lao employees, which I thought was a bit backhanded in fact.

LC: Joe, can you tell me a little bit about the Lao employee who was kind of leading this on the USAID side? Who was that person?

JM: I don't remember his name, but he was not, as I've indicated, a typical Lao because he was much more aggressive. I think he may have worked for the controller's office, but I'm not sure which division of the AID mission he worked for now, Laura, and I don't remember his name. He was quite articulate and quite aggressive in maintaining his position, but we didn't get involved in any recriminations during the meeting. He stood fast on his position and I certainly didn't change my opposition to the increase as a result of the session I had with him. I think he brought in two or three others as I recall. I can't remember distinctly now. I don't think it was just he who met with me. I think it was he and a few others whom he'd gathered around him.

LC: Joe, did you have any sense that this move to go on strike might have been inspired somehow?

JM: No. I don't think so. I think it was just the feeling that often—I think the natural feeling of employees who always want as much money as they can get when wages are up for consideration. I never got any hint that there was any political motivation for the position taken by the employees. No.

LC: You've mentioned that USAID was the second largest employer and that this would have had kind of a knock-on effect for the royal Lao government.

JM: Exactly, because it was the only employer bigger than we. Of course, the moment that any salary increase of our employees became official and become public and the Lao employees of the government would become aware of it and would certainly

inform their government. Interestingly, Laura, during the time I was in Laos the Lao government never did follow through on giving a wage increase. As far as I know they never did. So my fears proved ungrounded, but I don't think they were unreasonable at all.

LC: No. In fact it seems like a direct line. I mean, I can absolutely see what you were thinking. Did you ever run numbers? Maybe you don't recall what they were, but can you frame out what the likely financial impact would be?

JM: Well, you see, there were two impacts that I mentioned. The impact on our own direct administrative budget of the mission would have been considerable, but not that threatening. But if the Lao government had followed through the impact on the U.S. aid level to Laos would have been much more substantial.

LC: Of course, would have undercut your other efforts that you described.

JM: Exactly, to hold the aid level at what it was without increasing it.

LC: Right. Joe, will you tell us at some point some more about your views of Bill Gaud?

JM: Well, yes. I can do that. I can do that a little later, Laura. My interaction with him became more direct later. So I'll give you my views about him.

LC: Very good. Very good. Joe, is there additional material on this particular episode that—

JM: No, there's nothing more than that, but I want to proceed with this question of my relations with the Lao because in another sense they became worse in a much more important sense than just this strike of our employees. That's what I'm going to lead into now. As I have indicated in our discussions, I was involved in a number of contentious issues with the government over the U.S. Import Program over the level of U.S. contributions to the Foreign Exchange Stabilization Fund and the fact that the Lao government budget was in crisis because of the U.S. decision to free the price of gold in the United States, which affected the world price and cut out the ground from one of the chief sources of revenue of the Lao government. That was our export tax on gold. I was involved in these very contentious issues with the government and Sisouk, the minister of finance, with whom I had had excellent relations both professionally and personally—I think I did mention that in the summer of '67 when our oldest daughter Penny left Laos after being there for summer vacation, he invited Nonie, her, and me to his residence for

what he called a farewell glass of champagne, *champagne d'adieu*. I think I mentioned that before, which was an indication of the very fine relations. I also played badminton with him, which I thought he engaged in a bit one-upsman gamesmanship. We always played doubles. I didn't play singles. He got the best badminton player in all the kingdom of Laos as his partner, which I thought was not quite fair.

LC: Which was who? Who was that, Joe?

JM: Excuse me?

LC: Who was the best player?

JM: I don't remember the name of the best Lao player, but I was surprised to find that he was on the court. Of course, naturally he and the minister of finance overwhelmed me and my partner. We were not professionals in any sense at all. Anyway, I had fine relations with Sisouk, but because I was involved in a direct confrontation with him over these financial issues since he was minister of finance. It reached the point where he would no longer speak to me. So that was a very serious deterioration in relations and he was obviously reporting to Prince Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister, about these developments. I've already described to you the sort of climactic session in the prime minister's office with an International Monetary Fund delegation, Lao ministers including the prime minister and all the chiefs of mission of the governments which were contributing to the Foreign Exchange Stabilization Fund. When nobody was standing up to the Lao on this question of its budgetary crisis except myself—Bill Sullivan wasn't there at that point. He was in Washington, I think I indicated, on leave at that point so the U.S. embassy was represented by Bob Hurwitch, who was the deputy chief of mission and then serving as *charge d'affaire*. He didn't open his mouth on this so it was left to me. Obviously Souvanna Phouma resented it and the meeting broke up almost immediately after my intervention. Shortly after this climactic session as I was going to the States on home leave for a couple of months I decided to invite Souvanna Phouma for dinner to see whether I could mend relationships. To my surprise he accepted the invitation. I didn't think he would, but he was very formal, distant, and really icy during the whole evening. He not only stayed for dinner, he played bridge for several hours after dinner, but there was certainly no improvement of our relations as a result of this dinner, which he had accepted. Shortly thereafter Nonie

and I left Laos. To indicate that the worsening of my relations with the Lao government was not by any means across the board, our good friend Ngon Sananikone, the minister of public works and national economy, even came to the airport to see Nonie and me off in what I thought was a very fine friendly and personal gesture on his part. Nonie and I left Laos feeling quite light-hearted because this was the first time in my diplomatic career that we were going back to the same country after home leave in the U.S. without all the turmoil involved in change of station and packing up effects and a big round of farewell parties and so forth. We even stopped in Hawaii for, I think, for a couple of days on Waikiki and enjoyed ourselves on the way home and got to the States. I was at my parents' home in eastern Maryland when I got a telephone call from Martin Hertz who was the country director for Laos and Cambodia in the State Department saying that a cable had been received via a very secret CIA channel stating that Prince Souvanna Phouma had called Bob Hurwitch, then *charge d'affaires* stating that he did not want me to return to Laos after my leave. This I was thunderstruck by this. It was a real unexpected blow out of the dark, so to speak. I immediately surmised it was because of the session I had had with Souvanna Phouma, the disagreement I had had with Souvanna Phouma during that session with the International Monetary Fund Team in Laos.

LC: Right.

JM: It was clear to me that Hurwitch had not put up any defense. He simply elected to send this cable to Washington. As a matter of fact, later when I saw Hurwitch again he voluntarily said to me, "Oh, Hertz should never have shown that cable to you. I didn't expect that," which indicated to me a very strange attitude because how else would the State Department explain that I was not going to go back to Laos when everybody expected me to? I think had Bill Sullivan been in Laos at that point this whole affair would have been handled differently from the way Hurtwitch—Hurwitch, it was clear to me, was somewhat jealous of my position as head of the AID mission and the extensive and close relations I had with the Lao. So he clearly didn't put up any defense on my position. Incidentally, while I'm talking about him, Laura, he subsequently became ambassador to the Dominican Republic. While he was there, he engaged in some financial shenanigans, I think involving embassy funds and/or labor in construction of a vacation home for himself in the Dominican Republic and had to leave the service as a

result of it. So his career ended in disgrace. I'll just add that point to his consternation, obviously.

LC: Oh, yes.

JM: He was extremely contrite afterwards, but it was too late then.

LC: Yes, and rightly so. That's public money. Joe, can you say a little bit about his background? How did he come to be placed in Laos?

JM: Bob, as in Bob Hurwitch, had risen through the career ranks of the Foreign Service. He had entered at the bottom just as I had and had had a good career and came to Laos in '67 as the number two in the embassy under Bill Sullivan. The previous incumbent of that position had been Emory Swank, S-W-A-N-K. Incidentally, he and I had entered the Foreign Service in the same group in August of 1946.

LC: As I recall, the groups were coming in every couple of weeks or so.

JM: Exactly at that point. He and I were in the same two weeks' group that came in. I had remembered him a bit from that experience twenty years earlier. I had not known Hurwitch before, but obviously Bill Sullivan had agreed to his being named as the deputy chief of mission because it's normal when deputy chiefs of mission change, the State Department personnel people send out several files on possible candidates to the ambassador so that he can express his preference among those names that have been submitted to him. So he obviously had agreed to Hurwitch.

LC: So he was not a Southeast Asia or Asia expert?

JM: No, I don't think—I think he was more of a Latin America expert than a Southeast Asian one, as I recall.

LC: Very interesting. You mentioned also that the cable had come via some other channel then.

JM: Not through the regular State Department channels at all. It had been sent via a very restricted CIA channel called a back channel where the distribution is extremely limited in Washington when the cable was received. So that was the channel that Hurwitch elected to use in order to send Souvanna Phouma's request that I not come back to Washington, an interesting choice. Also, I think, sort of indicative of the fact that he wanted to keep it I guess as concealed as possible. He wanted to make sure I didn't come back, but he didn't want his hand revealed in any manner, which I guess his

subsequent statement to me that Martin Hertz should not have shown that to me indicated he really didn't want me to see his hand at all in this operation.

LC: Would you have had an opportunity to speak with Ambassador Sullivan about this?

JM: No. Well, not right at the time. I felt that once Souvanna Phouma had made that request and it had gotten into the official channels that there was no chance of a reversal of it. If it hadn't gotten into the official channels there might have been, but once it becomes a matter of record, I realized that I had to accept this decision of Souvanna Phouma's. Incidentally, Laura, I somewhat compare this—somewhat, not nearly as earthshaking as what happened to General Stilwell in China during World War II.

LC: Joe—

JM: I was putting great pressure on the Lao government in connection with its budgetary crisis so as to try to prevent an insistent demand by the Laos for increased U.S. aid. Of course, Stilwell was putting great pressure on Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of China during World War II, to improve his military and military performance to the point, of course, that as you recall Chiang Kai-shek finally asked President Franklin Roosevelt for the recall of Stilwell. Roosevelt agreed to it. My case is not nearly as important as Stilwell's but there is some analogy there in the way the U.S. government reacts to this sort of thing. As it happened, of course, if Stilwell was probably right in a substantive sense, and I think I was right in the substantive sense from the standpoint of U.S. interests certainly over the longer range, but the U.S. government usually accedes to this kind of demand of a foreign government. I know of another case, Laura, that occurred, which is not very well known publicly. In the 1950s one of our ambassadors to South Korea was putting great pressure on Syngman Rhee, who was then the U.S. ally but also the dictator of South Korea. Great pressure to the point that Rhee asked the U.S. government to recall him. The U.S. government agreed and that fellow never got another ambassadorial appointment. So we see the way the wind blows when this sort of situation occurs, Laura. In that sense it is, I think, historically interesting.

LC: It's also, it seems, indicative of how important in the larger framework of strategy and strategic it is to retain some of America's allied, their friends in the

governments with which we have these very important strategic relationships. I mean, Souvanna Phouma.

JM: One could even draw an analogy with Iraq today. I'm sure that our ambassador is constantly putting pressure on the Iraqi government to improve its performance in the security field, but he, obviously aware of what could happen to him, has to act under certain constraints in bringing pressure on the Iraqi government. Fortunately, I noticed just the other day two or three days ago, Bush, who usually just says to stay the course, but he added that the Iraqi government, the Iraqi prime minister, must act in accordance with reasonable requirements to help bring this security situation under control, particularly the sectarian violence that's occurring now. This was the first time I'd heard Bush add this condition to his position that we should remain in Iraq until the security situation has been improved and brought to a position where the Iraqi government can deal with it. In other words, he put some pressure on the Iraqi prime minister, I thought, with that statement. That's a somewhat analogous situation, I think.

LC: Does, at least in the public realm, help support rather than make more vulnerable America's representatives over there who are—

JM: Exactly. It strengthens their position in dealing with the Iraqi government.

LC: Was this, Joe, this experience that you had made more complicated because you were with USAID rather than being a State Department official over there?

JM: Laura, I'll proceed now with my exposition of reaction to it.

LC: Very good.

JM: I mentioned, but let me first say Bill Sullivan, it didn't change his view of me at all. As a matter of fact, as soon as he got back to Laos he let me know that he wanted me to come back to Laos so he could give me a farewell reception in my honor, which he thought I should have and that I should exit Laos with a certain amount of official dignity in accordance with the performance that I had given in Laos. So what I've been describing took place in June, and in August I was going to Laos, I was going to Southeast Asia on an official visit to Vietnam, which I shall describe later. Bill insisted that since I was going to be in the area in Vietnam I come on up to Laos so he could give an official reception at the embassy to make a formal goodbye to me. At that reception all of the Lao government officials with whom I had been dealing came to the

reception except for Souvanna Phouma. Souvanna Phouma did not appear, but all the others came. I remember particularly where I made by goodbyes to them and particularly the goodbye to the deputy prime minister and the minister of education, Leuam Insisiengmay, the man whom I have indicated was very shy and not demonstrative of the feelings. He held me hand for a long time and said in French to me, "You have done a great deal for Laos during the three years you've been here." I've always remembered that because that, in a sense, made it worthwhile, that I had put so much of myself into the three years I had been in Laos. Souvanna Phouma, as I indicated, did not appear. Subsequently, I think about two months later in October, I believe, Souvanna Phouma was in Washington and the Lao embassy gave a reception for him in Washington. I was invited. I went there and when I went through the receiving line and was greeted by him it was extremely perfunctory, formal and distant, whereas Sisouk, the minister of finance who was also at the reception, was very warm and friendly in contrast with the fact that he wouldn't speak to me during the last few weeks I was in Laos. I heard that Sisouk was very sorry later over the way he had treated me at the end of my stay in Laos and what had happened and my being declared, in effect, *persona non grata*.

LC: Joe, did you ever get a sense or hear anything to the effect that there might have been some resistance to Souvanna Phouma's declaration that you were *persona non grata*?

JM: No, Laura. No, I never did, but the fact that all of the Lao ministers with whom I had been dealing from the deputy prime minister down came to that farewell reception for me that Bill Sullivan gave indicated I think how they felt, but I don't think they tried to fight the decision. Laura, though at the time I felt very badly over this. Of course, I looked at the pros and cons of it in many ways. I've looked at how I had reacted at the meeting with the International Monetary Fund delegation. I've realized that Souvanna Phouma had probably lost face because of my open opposition, my open pressing at that meeting for the Lao to resolve their budgetary problems rather than looking to the U.S. for additional aid. Doing that at an open meeting probably caused him a loss of face, which one should not do, particularly in an Oriental context. On the other hand, I think had I not taken that position the U.S. stance would have been probably permanently compromised and our interests would not have been served. So in the final

analysis I think that I had to take the position I did at that time. One can also examine my performance in the light of other factors. After all, I was trying—one of my chief strategy objectives was to try to put Laos back into a position where it was self sufficient in food, particularly with respect to the staple of rice. Obviously, I had not gotten to the point where that objective had been achieved by any means, although we were making progress toward it. In that sense it would have been better if I had gone back to Laos and continued with the program I did. But even though in the final analysis the communists took over in 1975 and all the progress in that sense would have been destroyed anyway by the communists, as it was, as I'm sure it was because of their position with respect to economies with a constant state interference. Even there, I think, in the long run it didn't really matter whether I went back to Laos. As far as the political aspects of it was concerned, I think that I certainly served through my three years to carry out our political objective of trying to help the Lao government win the hearts and minds of its people by the kind of aid program we had and by constantly traveling with Lao ministers into the countryside, tried to make sure they got some credit in the minds of the villagers. On the other political aspect of our aid program, which was to keep Laos on our side in the war in Southeast Asia, I don't think that Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist prime minister, really had any alternative country to which he could turn for the kind of assistance he was getting from us. So in the last analysis I don't think he could have opted to switch to the other side because of the position I was taking on the aid program. One might argue that the fact that he eventually stayed in Laos after the communists took over in 1975 indicates otherwise, but he stayed in a private capacity. He was no longer associated in any way with the government. I think he simply opted to stay as a Lao as Leuam Insisiengmay did, as General Pasouk did, and certain other prominent Lao. So in the last analysis I don't think that my decision hurt the United States in any way. As a matter of fact I think it helped to protect our interests. As far as my own career was concerned, as I looked back on it, I think had I gone back to Laos for another year or two or three it would not have advanced my career. I think the three years I had there were enough from a career standpoint. So, Laura, I guess I have no ultimate feelings that what I did was wrong. On the contrary, I think what I did was right.

LC: Well, and that's why you did it.

JM: That's right. Even looking back in retrospect, one can reassess in retrospect what one has done and perhaps come out with a different decision, but I don't.

LC: At the time, Joe, this had to be a little bit hard to take.

JM: Well, it was very hard to take at the time, Laura, yes. Absolutely, because I'd given so much of myself during those three years there that I sort of felt let down by it.

LC: You had made, it sounds like, a good deal of progress.

JM: That's right. We were making progress.

LC: I think that's reflected in a number of different places. I've seen material both in *FRUS* and also in congressional hearings that bears that out from this period. Did you have any sense of what would come next? Who would make that kind of decision about your career?

JM: That's what I'm going into next, Laura.

LC: Very good. Okay.

JM: I want to go into the Washington reaction to Souvanna Phouma's request that I not come back. In the State Department, Bill Bundy, who was the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs and who had indicated during a visit to Laos in 1967 that he understood I was giving a very fine performance as head of the AID mission, reverted after this to his rather customary condescending manner to me. He offered me the directorship of the Vietnam Working Group and said, "This may be a bit of *déjà vu* since you served in this at least a couple of times in the past." I thought, absolutely, definitely. I don't want to go back into the position I've had a couple of times in the past. Then I learned much later that he had written a reviewing officer's statement of the annual efficiency report that Bill Sullivan had submitted on me. In the reviewing statement he indicated that I had taken, quote "too intellectual," close quote, an approach to my job in Laos. That was the reason that Souvanna Phouma had requested that I not go back. I felt that was pretty wide of the mark because I feel that I'm pretty much a realist and pragmatist and not too intellectual. That was his assessment of my performance, which again didn't surprise me. I don't think—as I've indicated earlier I don't think Bill Bundy ever really liked me any more than I liked him. So that's where the State Department wound up on my performance in Laos. As far as Bill Gaud, the head of the AID agency

in Washington and Rutherford Poats, who was number two, were concerned, they urged me to continue with AID. They were very pleased with my performance and wanted me to continue with AID. Well, we looked around to see what the other jobs might be in AID, the other mission heads, and the only thing they really had opening up were Tunisia and Morocco which were, while interesting countries, missions far smaller than what I had been handling in Laos. So I wasn't really interested in undertaking either of those missions. Then the thing they wanted me to do was to become the number two to Jim Grant in the newly created Vietnam Bureau. Jim Grant wanted me also. I'm going to leave that, Laura, because that's the subject of the next major assignment. I won't go farther into that at the moment. What I would like to do now, perhaps, in our remaining few minutes today is to indicate that not only do I feel in retrospect that how I handled the situation in Laos with respect to the AID mission was correct, but I also wanted to indicate that I learned some very significant things in Laos in terms of management. In the Foreign Service, as I've indicated earlier, I had never managed more than six people. In Laos I had the five hundred Americans, six hundred third-country nationals and over two thousand Lao employees as well as a lot of contract people, International Voluntary Service, two big air company contracts, et cetera. There I did learn a lot about management, which I never would have learned in the State Department scheme of things. I look back on that as a very useful thing in terms of my personal development. I learned, for example, that it was not all that hard to make decisions. I remember many times when I gathered people within the mission around the conference table in my office or the bigger conference table there in our conference room to thrash out decisions. Decisions could be made, but by far the more difficult thing was getting decisions executed, which I think is one of the most difficult things in management because decisions that are made are not so much resisted by people down the line but as they try to carry them out they run into obstacles every time. They run into people who may have different views. They run into people with different priorities. They run into the need for resources which may not be readily available, the need for personnel which may not be readily available, all these things. The normal reaction of people down the line when they run into these obstacles is through inertia to just gradually let the things slide and do nothing. So what the top needs to do is through his own intervention and through follow-

up systems that he has established is to make sure that these obstacles encountered by people down the line are brought to the attention of the top-level people and that the top-level attention is devoted to making sure that these obstacles are overcome in some way, either directly or through the follow-up procedure he has established. That I think is an extremely important aspect of management, not so much making decisions but seeing that the decisions made are executed. Incidentally, Laura, I think I mentioned in passing that one of the things I learned from Jim Grant, whom I worked for subsequently as I've just indicated a few minutes ago, is that even big governments like ours cannot really carry out effectively more than three or four major objectives at the same time because otherwise attention gets spread too widely over so many different things that none of them really get achieved. That was one thing that he taught me and I think it's very true looking back on my own Lao experience and looking at the way governments operate. I don't think I've ever seen this particular conclusion described in any managerial textbook. I don't know whether you have or not, but I think it's very correct.

LC: I agree. I'm thinking of even much smaller units having difficulty juggling more than three or four large procedures, let alone talking on the scale of something like USAID or the mission that you were in.

JM: Or overall government.

LC: Yes, the government as a whole. Well, that's really just kind of *terra incognita* really, some things.

JM: A second thing I learned in the management field is that I think the rarest thing in the world is good managers. As I've indicated, with five hundred American employees in the AID mission I never really found more than about a half-a-dozen of my subordinates who I felt were really good and effective managers. Managerial talent is one of the rarest things in the world in my experience at any rate. Maybe that helps explain why big executives in the private sector in the United States are getting so much more in compensation than the average employee is, simply because it is a quality which is found so seldom among people. As I say, that's another thing that I became very much aware of as my three years in the AID mission unfolded in Laos.

LC: Well, it's very interesting to think about that in the context of the State Department where careers are managed and someone has to make those assignment

decisions, although it's clear there's some participation by the different superior and employees. But did you find the same problem? Did you find, as you think back, the State Department had difficulty identifying good managers?

JM: Oh, I think so. I don't think management was one of the strong points of the State Department. Certainly there are exceptions, but I think that the State Department, like any other agency, had a scarcity of good managers. Look at the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a sort of prime public example in recent times. I think you'd find this in not only agencies of the government, but I think in businesses, too.

LC: Joe, speaking of—

JM: Probably even in the academic world.

LC: Yes. I think for my own safety I'll leave that one aside, but Joe, thinking about Laos and its importance to the United States during the period when you were there, can you say something more about what was achieved relative to American strategic interests in Southeast Asia?

JM: Well, our fundamental interest in Laos was to keep it on our side so that we could continue to do what we were trying to do, ineffectively I think in the final analysis, of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We wanted to have the Lao government to continue to permit us to bomb that trail. I've indicated on many occasions during these interviews, I think that while that was good as far as it went it was not the really effective means of controlling the infiltration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam of men and material. I suppose also we were interested in continuing the secret CIA war in northeastern Laos for whatever—it was not a major contribution, but it was some contribution to the overall conflict in Southeast Asia. I think those were the two main things we wanted in a political-military sense out of the Lao government. We wanted to make sure that the Lao prime minister would not come to a conclusion that these things should not be done. He didn't want anything publicized about them, as I think I have indicated very strongly, which of course raises additional difficulties. For the U.S. government the same thing was true in Cambodia. Sihanouk wouldn't object to our bombing the North Vietnamese in Cambodia as long as we didn't say anything publicly about it. You and I both know how leaky the U.S. government is on all occasions and how difficult it is to maintain secrets of this sort even though your foreign and political leaders with whom you're

dealing may make their acquiescence in it subject to you keeping it out of public realm.

LC: Joe, was there ever a point during the time that you were in Laos that you thought Souvanna Phouma would lose control of the government?

JM: No, Laura. No, Laura. Shortly before I got there, there was an attempt by the rightists to mount a coup, a coup headed by General Phoumi.

LC: Yes.

JM: Which failed in February of 1965. The only other coup attempt during my time there was the one by General Ma, the head of the air force, but that wasn't directed at trying to overthrow Souvanna Phouma. That was directed at trying to eliminate certain Lao generals who were threatening to oust General Ma from his position.

LC: But Souvanna Phouma had his hand on the wheel quite firmly?

JM: In a political sense I think so, Laura. During the three years I was there, most certainly, and I guess subsequently until the communists took over.

LC: What was his general relations with—I mean, how can you characterize his general relationship with Ambassador Sullivan?

JM: I think quite close. After all, Souvanna Phouma had been, I think, very impressed from his neutralist standpoint with the position taken by Averell Harriman during the Geneva Conference on Laos in 1962. Bill Sullivan was then Harriman's right-hand man during the Geneva Conference on Laos. As a matter of fact it, was that experience which led to Bill's selection as ambassador to Laos in the summer of 1964. So since Souvanna Phouma was very happy with the outcome of that conference, although as I've indicated I don't think it really served our ultimate interest, he looked favorably on Sullivan. I think they always had very good relations during the time I was there, as a matter of fact during all of Bill's period. Bill was there from the summer of '64, I think, to the end of '68.

LC: Joe, let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [49] of [57]
Date: October 27, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-seventh of October 2006. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking as he usually does from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, I'd like to thank you for your time as always. You know I appreciate the investment you're making in spending time with me and with the Oral History Project. Joe, I gather some evidence has come to hand which suggests a correction is in order.

JM: Right. It's a minor one, Laura, but for the record. I have discussed the one-day visit made to Laos by Congressman George H. W. Bush, the father of the present president, which I found him a complete delight. I said for the record that I took him to Sam Thong up in northeastern Laos, the Meo area of Laos, where there was pretty constant fighting between the Meo on the one hand and the Lao and Vietnamese communists on the other. I find from letters from my wife to her family, which turned up quite recently, and I have been re-reading because we felt we had lost them completely, that I actually took him to Vang Vieng, which was the seat of the neutralists in Laos, north of Vientiane, rather than to Sam Thong. So I'll just make this rather small correction for the record. I don't think anybody would have ever picked it up, but I'll put it in the record anyway.

LC: Joe, do you have the date roughly?

JM: Well, I think it was 1967 because Bush was then a freshman member of the House of Representatives. He had been elected in '66. He served two terms before he ran for the Senate in 1970 as the Republican candidate that lost to Lloyd Benson. So this was 1967.

LC: Very good. Well, Joe, we were discussing your—

JM: We were discussing the management lessons I had learned from my three years experience in Laos. I think that's where we wound up the last time.

LC: That's correct. Yes.

JM: I'd already talked about two of them. One was that I found it not as difficult making decisions, although that occupies a fair amount of time and one has to listen to both sides or all sides before making the decisions, but much more difficult was making sure that those decisions, once made, were executed. As I think I've pointed out, this is not because there was direct opposition by the subordinates to the decisions, but because in implementing decisions, anybody in a bureaucracy, and I suspect in a corporation as well, encounters human inertia when problems are met. Problems are always met in carrying out a decision, problems which arise from differing priorities from the people in other agencies or divisions one has to work with in order to carry things out, the limited resources for things that one wants to do in one's own division, and many things of that sort. The normal human thing when one begins to encounter obstacle or obstacles is to sort of, because of inertia, sort of give up. One may push, but one doesn't push hard enough and one really needs the intervention of somebody higher up in order to resolve a lot of these problems. So that I found that either I or the person to whom I had delegated responsibility in the front office to follow up on these things and make sure the decisions, make sure they were being executed would have to intervene. That occupied, I would say, ninety-five percent of the time and maybe five percent devoted to making decisions. That to me was an interesting lesson in management. I also found that—let me check my notes here—the other point I made the last time on management was, oh, that really finding good sub-managers is one of the more difficult things in any major operation because management ability, I think, is one of the rarest qualities in human beings. In the five hundred Americans or so that I had in the AID mission in Laos in the three years I was there, I never found more than about a half-a-dozen subordinates who were really very good and effective sub-managers. So that was another important lesson that I would like to emphasize. I also encountered another interesting problem, which I suspect many managers do. That is when one finds that two sub-managers who are really very capable come at loggerheads because their priorities are different. I've mentioned this, I think, at the time we were discussing some of these things, Laura, in the past. My experience with that was between the head of the Public Works Division, who was such an excellent

person at carrying out construction projects as soon as we had decided upon them without going through long contracting procedures, getting them done. I mentioned when the airport in northwestern Laos was swept away in the Mekong flood of 1966 he had a new jet-capable airport ready within six weeks, which was a remarkable instance of his ability. The secret of that was he had his own people, his engineers, his construction people, primarily third-country nationals and Lao whom he employed. He managed these people very flexibly. He used merit pay extensively. If somebody proved to be very good he would raise his salary without regard to classification systems. Now, on the other hand I've also indicated that I replaced the chief of my administrative or management division because he could never come up with, answer my questions even about how many people we employed, let along other questions about them. He was succeeded by a very capable man who came from the mission in Pakistan. He, within a very short time, had established a very orderly personnel system so we knew where we stood there. These two both very effective sub-managers came at loggerheads because obviously the administrative man wanted to extend this very good personnel system he had set up to Tom Cole. Tom thought that would limit his ability to carry out construction projects quickly. I can remember a number of meetings in my office when these two were at loggerheads and I never could resolve that problem in any substantive sense. I just had to cajole the two of them along constantly. They got so they didn't like each other, but each was so effective in what he did I didn't want to come down on one side or the other. That's another thing I learned in management. Sometimes there are problems which are in a sense insolvable, but just keep sort of pushing them along without coming to a final decision on the question.

LC: Are they personality-driven and so therefore unique?

JM: To a degree they were both personality-driven and they also were driven by the fact that the fundamental approach of each of them, which was what I wanted, came into conflict in order to achieve the objectives that we wanted. Sure, when two people disagree for a long time substantively usually some personality problems, if they weren't there at the outset, begin to enter into the situation.

LC: But as a manager, Joe, it sounds like one of the solutions here, although you didn't really categorize it that way, but I think it might be seen that way, is to try to

maintain good humor and—

JM: That's right and keep praising each of them for they do, even if the two objectives that they have at my insistence are in conflict.

LC: Right.

JM: So sometimes you can't resolve problems in any neat sense. You just have to keep humoring them along.

LC: Yes. That's the difference between humans and machines, really.

JM: Exactly. Laura, another lesson that I learned that I also went into detail on this as we went along so I won't belabor the point, was that in my case at any rate, eventually I found the weaker sisters among our senior personnel in the AID mission. Now some top managers may find these things very quickly. It took me a longer time, but I eventually became aware of them and got rid of the individuals concerned. At least my lesson was it takes time to find these things out, but one does eventually and then one has to act in order to correct them. Then the final point I would like to discuss, which I don't think I have discussed before in terms of management lessons, relates to social research. When I arrived in Laos I found that an academic social researcher had been assigned by the AID headquarters in Washington to the mission because AID Washington then was becoming particularly interested in the matter of social research with respect to rural development, what the best approach might be to rural development in all these less developed countries in which AID was operating. Understandably, the top people in Washington thought that this should be examined as closely as possible. One of the people pushing it was Rutherford Poats, who was the assistant administrator for East Asia in the AID agency and therefore my immediate boss in Washington. So I had to make sure that we devoted a certain amount of time at the top level to this in Laos. This guy would come in from time to time. He was a rather ponderous individual and outlined what his thinking was and what his approach might be. Well, he spent many months, I think actually, two years or so, working out his approach and his program, his study, his travels into the countryside, his interviews, and finally came up with his conclusions. Those conclusions were the same as what anybody with good common sense and some experience had already arrived at with respect to the problem he was studying. I mention this, Laura, now this may get me into conflicts with you and/or some

of your colleagues in the academic world.

LC: I think you're probably safe with me.

JM: I tend to put a rather low priority on social research because this particular instance confirmed my general experiences that the conclusions reached are generally those that anybody who has a certain amount of good common sense would have arrived at anyway.

LC: No conflict, Joe.

JM: No conflict? Okay, good, Laura. But to me this was largely a waste of resources and effort for the reason I've just indicated, but it certainly confirmed what I felt in a number of things. My wife and I don't always agree on this as I think a lot of academic people would not, but I'm glad you do at any rate.

LC: What would have been the distribution of his findings? Do you have a sense?

JM: Well, I'm sure that they were sent to Washington to those who were interested there. I can't remember specifically. I'm sure they were, just as they were distributed within the mission, but as far as rural development is concerned, what I learned in my experience in Laos and I think again was sort of a commonsensical approach, the first thing the peasant villagers want is education because they feel—they've had enough experience even though they haven't perhaps been outside the level of their villages or not very far from it—is that if you're going to get ahead in the world or their kids are going to get ahead in the world they've got to have education. That's the first thing they really want in terms of economic and social development. The second thing is health and to get both these things we were working extensively before this guy ever arrived in Laos, the social researcher, with the construction of schools and the establishment of rudimentary health dispensaries in the village. With our teacher training program because it was very difficult, of course, in a terribly underdeveloped country like Laos to find teachers who could really contribute even a modicum to village level kids.

LC: Sure. Mm-hmm.

JM: Then as far as economic development is concerned to increase production in order to raise the level of income in the village, one thing we learned when we were trying to introduce the new, higher, more productive varieties of rice seed, the IR-8,

which had been developed at an agricultural institute in the Philippines under American guidance, that the peasants at first are reluctant to accept to them, these newfangled elements of production because they're not sure they're going to succeed even though they know that often enough the traditional ones haven't at least they have, on the other hand, actually succeeded often enough to make sure the family has something to eat during the year. They put it right down at the level of survival. They are very conservative in accepting new things. Particularly if they have a little bit of excess ground, in the case of rice [culture], they were willing to begin to experiment with these things with the new seeds if explained to them properly. In other words, peasants I think around the world tend to be very conservative people, but they also have a lot of basic common sense. They know what is needed for survival. Now what I haven't talked about, Laura, here, as far as economic and social development is concerned, this is something I learned earlier in Vietnam, that the most elemental thing of all as far as peasant villagers are concerned is survival, physical survival. So that in war or guerilla conflict they are looking first of all to survival. They'll opt to go with whichever side, whatever the politics are, which offer the least chance of their being killed or their families.

LC: Sure. Sure.

JM: That's perfectly understandable, too, but I think a lot of people who haven't had the experience with this kind of thing don't understand that before you win hearts and minds you want to make sure that the body succeeds in surviving. I'd like to apply that, Laura, to some of the basic divisions in the U.S. today about the war on terrorism versus civil rights. I put it this way. If I am dead because of terrorist action what good are my civil rights going to do me? The first priority today, in my view, is to make sure that we are physically protected before we start worrying about whether our civil rights are being violated or not.

LC: Joe, just on that point, the "violations"—and I put that in quotations verbally—I don't know what your view is, but my thinking is don't yet seem to have really sort of crossed the Rubicon to infringement of our fundamental freedoms in the United States.

JM: I couldn't agree more, Laura.

LC: So I think it's sort of a red herring, actually.

JM: Exactly.

LC: That's just my view of it.

JM: For example, the monitoring of telecommunications I think is absolutely essential. I think it is most unwise to reveal this at all. Sure, the enemy may be aware of it, but why emphasize it so that he's so constantly aware of it when he attempts to communicate and therefore does his best to conceal from us what he's planning to do.

LC: There's also a question about whether we can or ought to have some presumption of privacy in electronic communications at all, given that they are regulated by the federal government and that they are out on the airwaves in whatever sense that is, either digital or whatever. I'm not sure there's a presumption of privacy in the first place.

JM: I guess I've lived long enough in countries where one was never sure that his telephone calls weren't being monitored that I don't get that concerned over this sort of thing these days. I remember when I was inspecting in Yugoslavia—this was in 1971—I was told by some of the people in the embassy there—this was under the Tito regime—that the monitoring by the Yugoslav authorities was sufficiently clumsy that one often said, "Get off my line. You're interfering technically with what I'm trying to communicate," but they would do this every once in a while.

LC: That was subtle.

JM: Yeah, right. So one's experience I suppose affects one's feelings today to some degree as well.

LC: Well, Joe, can you push the analogy about the relative priority to be assigned to hearts and minds and survival issues for people to the Afghani or Iraqi situations right now?

JM: Yeah. Well, I think re-establishment of security certainly should be the first priority before you begin to worry about economic and social development. The two can, to a degree, go hand-in-hand, but never forget that the physical security is primordial because if you attempt to push the other forward you're not really going to win the peasants over if they feel that cooperating with us brings their lives at risk. So you've got to do that, emphasize security first of all. I don't say forget the other, but to the extent that you can do it without endangering your own personnel too much, sure, proceed with

it, but just remember where the priorities should lie.

LC: Right. Make sure that your resources are appropriately balanced to reflect that.

JM: Exactly. Exactly.

LC: Well, I have to say, Joe, that I think the attempt to do some kind of research on the specifics of Lao society and how complicated it was probably a good idea, but not necessarily would the findings of one person instantly become policy relevant. Did this fellow who was doing this research in Laos, was he there the whole time you were there?

JM: I can't remember, Laura. I can't really give you an honest answer to that. I don't know whether his mission had been phased out before I left or not. It should have been but again, this is inertia of government bureaucracy that remained there. I'm not sure, Laura.

LC: Well, this is one of the critiques, of course, whenever the United States has made significant military investment. That was certainly true in Laos although it was supposed to be a secret, but we did have a significant investment there that we kind of blunder in without data sufficient to underpin our adventures by failing to take into account the distinctions in the society in which we're involved. Certainly if that's accurate, one person's study is not going to be sufficient to redress that.

JM: Right.

LC: That would be my thinking. Joe, as you think about Laos, and I know you said that it was one of your favorite tours just in terms of what you learned and the personal experience, but did you feel that as your time there ended—and you've described the circumstances of that—did you feel that Laos was in a better position to serve the purposes of U.S. foreign policy in 1968 than it was in 1965?

JM: To a degree, Laura, but the overall security situation in '68 was certainly not better than it was in '65. After all, by '68 the Tet Offensive had taken place in Vietnam. I think that encouraged greater activity on the part of the communist enemies in Laos. So I can't say that the most important aspect of developments in Laos, which was security, had really improved over those three years. In terms of economic development, yes, I think we had made some progress. We still hadn't made any definitive progress, but we certainly were moving toward our goal, but we couldn't achieve it certainly without basic

improvement in the security situation. As it happened, of course, Laos eventually fell to the communists and I think that most of the good that we accomplished was probably wiped out by the communist takeover.

LC: Was there, though, a shift in the thinking of let's say the most elite Lao families about the United States? During this time you had a lot of interactions with, as you've described, the very most powerful families in the country. How do you think they perceived the United States in general?

JM: I think as of the time we left they had not lost confidence in the United States. I think this is true in Vietnam, too. The Tet Offensive, which was eventually a military victory on the part of ourselves and the South Vietnamese, but a terrible political defeat because of the reaction within the States itself. So I don't think in either country by '68 the confidence of the elite in those two countries had been lost in us, Laura. No, that came later. That came later because we eventually withdrew completely in a military sense, forced on the Nixon administration by the Congress, which cut off funds for military activity.

LC: Exactly right. Hopefully we'll have a chance to discuss that as we go forward.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, I don't want to push you on, but I'm wondering if you want to—

JM: No. I've got other things, not quite so important, Laura, that I would like to point out here—

LC: Sure. Absolutely.

JM: At the conclusion of my Lao experience. These are more or less personal, I suppose not as significant as what I have been discussing. One of these things I would like to mention is that my family and myself having survived service in Laos can look back upon living to a certain extent on the edge of danger for three years was a thrilling experience to think about in the past. I've mentioned quite a number of the dangers which confronted not just my family, but certainly the American personnel operating in Laos in the process of our discussions over these weeks and months. I'll just mention them briefly, for example, the service of my wife and my oldest daughter for a week up in northeastern Laos at Sam Thong, our AID headquarters there, when the communists

were only about ten kilometers away, which they both look back upon of course as a fascinating one in every respect. But again, there was a certain amount of danger. I've also pointed out the dangers to planes and helicopters, which we used constantly, from flying over Laos, parts of which were enemy-occupied whether known to us or not. I mentioned that the AID representative in Luang Prabang lost one son and almost lost another when a helicopter in which they were riding was shot up by the communists who had taken over a particular village overnight. I also mentioned the loss of another aircraft flying between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai in the northwest. Perhaps or I would say probably shot down by the communists. The airplane with six or seven people aboard was never found so we don't know. We lost one of the senior officials in the International Voluntary Service program, the Peace Corps-type operation which I discussed in that airplane accident. I mentioned also my own experience flying from Savannakhet east to Kengkok, the village and the home of the deputy prime minister of Laos, which I visited a number of times flying alone with the pilot. I looked up and said, "You've gone too far." He said, "No," and I said, "Yes." As it turned out it took ten minutes to get back to Kengkok and I'm sure we were pretty much on the edge of communist-controlled territory in the Ho Chi Minh Trail area. I mentioned a number of these things. I mentioned the coup by General Ma, the chief of the Lao air force against his own colleagues in the army because he felt he was being squeezed out and how that affected us, particularly with two children in school about a mile or so from the general staff headquarters in Vientiane, which was being bombed by him. All these things, looking back on them, Laura, they add spice to life, but one is certainly glad he survived. Also, I remember when our kids used to go to the movies downtown in Vientiane. Every once in a while a Lao soldier out of jealousy would throw a grenade at another Lao soldier within a movie and there would be a certain number of casualties. So, you're never sure when your kids went to the movies whether everything was going to be all right or not. So all that adds a certain amount of spice to life, particularly as I say, having survived it. I'll also mention on another matter which I haven't gone into so much before, and that is some of our lighter moments in Laos. I would particularly like to describe the Lao New Year. Now I think most Americans, certainly during the Vietnam War, became aware of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, but virtually no one is aware of

the Lao New Year, which occurs in April and is called Pimay, which is spelled in English P-I-M-A-Y. It's pretty much a water festival and during that day, even in Vientiane, people standing along the streets with buckets of water were just throwing them at vehicles traveling down the street, which I suppose created a certain amount of danger, but it was always done. The big Pimay celebration always occurred in the royal capital of Luang Prabang. Each year for Pimay all the ambassadors and leading Lao officials would travel up to Luang Prabang for the Pimay celebration. There again there was much throwing of buckets of water at vehicles, including open jeeps. Another thing that was authorized on that particular day is that if a group of women came across a man they could tear his shirt off and this happened a great deal. Because of the water and the tearing off of shirts a man had to be sure he wore his oldest clothes then. I'll tell you another thing that always happened on that day. At a certain point during the afternoon the Lao would have induced all of the foreign ambassadors to a particular location in the city. Then they would throw them into a tropical, slimy pond, all the ambassadors. The Lao people—as I say—I've emphasized repeatedly in the past—are totally the antithesis of the Vietnamese. The Lao don't like to take life too seriously. They love fun, jokes, dancing, social activities. All this simply was characteristic of the kind of things the Lao enjoy a great deal. Now I'll also mention that each year on Pimay the Lao armed forces in Vientiane had a huge bash at the general staff headquarters in the evening. Each unit of the armed forces had its own big table there with whole cooked animals, cows, pigs, fowl of lesser size on the tables and would try to induce all the higher level military, diplomatic and civilian officials to come to their table to participate. There were no utensils. There were no knives, forks, or so forth. One simply dug into these animals with his hand, pulled off a bone or a piece of meat, ate it, and if it was a bone threw it over his shoulder. Did you ever see the movie in 1933, a very famous one, *The Private Lives of Henry VIII?*

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: Well, you remember how Henry sat at the table and would throw the bones over his shoulder as he finished eating?

LC: Yes.

JM: Well, this literally occurred at this Lao armed forces celebration of Pimay.

LC: Extraordinary.

JM: I kept thinking of that movie while we were there. We just went once. Then later during that evening when the senior people were all dancing with their partners, dancing either Lao dances or western dances, the leading generals would have big water tank trucks driven in and at some point would turn the hoses on full force. All the ambassadors and so forth were dancing on the floor and flood them. This was Pimay celebration in Laos, quite different of course from the Tet celebration of Vietnam, but very Lao in the type of thing they would do, pretty elemental and primitive perhaps, but enjoyable. This was an example of a sort of lighter moment that one had in Laos. I'll also mention another one, which maybe I shouldn't mention in the kind of recording, Laura. One night all the senior staff at our embassy were at the ambassador's residence for dinner. As we were leaving the wife of the air attaché, Anne Pettigrew, turned to us and said, "Why don't we go down to the White Rose and conclude the evening that way?" Now, there were lots of nightclubs in Vientiane and the White Rose was the best-known nightclub and brothel in the city. Well, everybody declined her suggestion except myself. So Anne and I went down to the—and this was I suppose 11:00 or 11:30 at night—we went down, took a booth, and ordered whiskeys. Pretty soon an attractive "hostess" in quotes, topless, came over and sat down with me and had a drink with me. I think I even had a couple of dances with her. Nothing untoward happened, although the tacit invitation obviously was there, but our booth was situated within sight of the staircase leading up to the second floor, which was where the brothel activities took place. We could see men from time to time going up or coming down that staircase, all looking pretty serious, whether before or afterwards. But the thing that really brought the house down as far as we were concerned, some guy coming down apparently knew us and spied us before we spied him because as we turned around and looked this guy had all of his face except his eyes covered by a handkerchief as he came down the staircase. This broke us up and on that Anne and I retired to our homes. I thought I'd add a little spice to our story by describing this episode, Laura.

LC: Well, it all goes on in Vientiane. What can you say?

JM: Exactly. Now, another different sort of event which occurred to me when I was on a visit one time down to Pakse, I was staying with the chief AID regional

representative for southern Laos in his house. The bedrooms were on the second floor. I was sleeping on a cot in a big room and was right in the middle of the floor. I think there were various other people who were sleeping there. At some point during the night I became slowly aware that somebody was lurking around my bed. I gradually woke up and realized it was a thief and began to yell. Of course, the thief disappeared quickly. It turned out he had broken a window down on the first floor and come in. The only thing which he took from mine—now this was probably about 1966 or 7—was a twenty-year-old pair of ankle high Army shoes which I had worn during World War II which I often wore when I went to the provinces. He took my old Army shoes. He didn't have a chance to take anything else. I think part of the reason he certainly didn't get any money from me because I think I had my wallet under my pillow.

LC: Oh, dear. There go your boots.

JM: Yeah. He took my boots. Wait, I think he also took some food out of the icebox downstairs. I guess he was not a very high-toned thief. He wanted some essentials.

LC: Joe, did you have anything else to wear?

JM: Oh, I think I had a pair of low-ankle shoes, regular shoes that I had to wear for the rest of that trip. Yes.

LC: I bet that was a sad moment. You kept those boots for twenty years.

JM: Now speaking of sadness I'll also mention, Laura, something which is sad. Maybe heavy is a better description. A lot of families, I think all families with children go through this sooner or later, but Foreign Service personnel tend to go through it a bit sooner and that was the separation from leaving kids in school in the States when one went abroad to serve or sending kids back. When we went to Laos in 1965 our oldest daughter, Penny, was then just about to enter the senior year of high school. She had been for two or three years in a private school in Alexandria, Virginia. She took a bus each morning from our house in Virginia. We were then stationed in Washington. When we were suddenly assigned to Laos in the summer of '65 we knew we would have to leave her behind. Fortunately, this school also had a boarding section. The headmistress of it knew my wife who I think had filled in for a few weeks as a history teacher at one point when she lost her history teacher during the middle of the semester. I think maybe I

mentioned this before, Laura. Anyway, she took on Penny. But the separation from our oldest daughter as she was entering her senior year in high school is difficult particularly for the mother. Then two years later our middle daughter, having exhausted the American school possibilities in Laos, had to be sent away for the second, third, and fourth years of high school. Most Americans in Vientiane sent their kids to an American school in Baguio in the Philippines, a hill station in the Philippines. But Nonie decided that she probably could get a better education if she was sent to a good school back in the States.

LC: Right.

JM: So again in 1967 after two years in Laos, Nonie had to be separated then from her second daughter. All this comes eventually to all families with kids, or should come at any rate, although we sort of criticize our kids today because they seem to stay so close with the kids even at school and later which we couldn't and didn't do when we were separated by half the world from them. So this is a sadder, heavier experience, particularly for a mother because it tends to come earlier in life for the mother and children in Foreign Service families than in the States. I'll just mention this for the record. I think it's interesting to be aware of it.

LC: Absolutely, yes. Yes. I mean, it's a hugely important thing because this is one area that probably hasn't changed a great deal.

JM: That's right.

LC: Still presents a difficulty for people who want to make Foreign Service their career. So yes, it's a difficult choice.

JM: Laura, I'll now switch to talking about my future as far as my career was concerned. In May of '68 Bill Sullivan went back to the States on consultation, I think, for some medical attention. I had asked Bill, our ambassador, before he left to see whether there were any ambassadorial possibilities for me in the future. He wrote me a letter after he got to Laos and said he had talked to Katzenbach, who was the number two in the State Department—he had been the attorney general before—about me and the possibility of an ambassadorial appointment. Katzenbach told him that since the Johnson administration was then on the way out that Johnson was not appointing any further ambassadors. So that seemed to foreclose that possibility at least as far as the remainder

of the year 1968 was concerned. So Nonie and I therefore accepted the other likelihood of return to Laos after a couple of months' home leave in the States after our three years in Laos. We had never done this before in our diplomatic career. We had always been transferred at the end of two or three years in a foreign post, which meant sort of a major upheaval in terms of moving from one place to another. So we rather liked the idea of returning to Laos because we thought we could enjoy our time off, so to speak, in the States much more. However, I had been in the States only a few days when I got a telephone call from the country director for Laos in the State Department, Martin Hertz, saying that a message had been received from Vientiane that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma did not want me to return to Laos. I was thunderstruck at the time. I hadn't expected this even though I knew that Souvanna and my personal relations with Souvanna had deteriorated because of the pressure I had been putting on the Lao government for financial reasons.

LC: Right. You discussed some of that. Yes.

JM: Excuse me?

LC: You did discuss some of that previously.

JM: Yes, I discussed that I think at some length. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was amazed, of course, that this happened. It upset our plans both professionally and personally. I happened to be at my folks' in eastern Maryland when I got the message by telephone. So I rushed to Washington to begin to explore what my future might be. We had retained ownership of a house in the Virginia suburbs about ten miles from Washington. It was becoming free of the tenant who had been in it for the three years we had been in Laos. So I decided to rent some furniture and put it in the house until it was determined whether we were going to be in Washington or abroad and also spent a lot of time bringing—we had about an acre of lawn and trees and flowers and bringing that back into order after three years of my absence while I was trying to work out the future of my career personally. Bill Bundy, the assistant secretary for East Asian affairs said—Laura, I see the time is passing. Do you want cut off now?

LC: Yes. Why don't we? We'll pick up here later.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [50] of [57]
Date: November 3, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the third of November 2006. I am in Lubbock as usual. The ambassador is speaking from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, if you could, last session I was asking you for some overview analyses of the situation in Laos as it changed during the time you were there. I wonder if you had some additional observations.

JM: Yes, Laura. I'll be glad to deal with that broader question. In a wide sense I don't think that there was any great change in the general situation in Laos between 1968 when I left and 1965 when I arrived. Breaking that down a bit, looking at the security situation, and then we really have to get down certainly into regional aspects and not try to deal with the country as a whole. In the northeast where the Meo, whom the CIA was supporting in the secret war against the communists, I think were in not quite as good a position in 1968 as they were in 1965 because the constant back-and-forth that they had in the struggle with the communists was gradually reducing their manpower to kids. I think I described in one of our sessions how my AID representative in that area was reporting to me that General Vang Pao was trying to resist CIA pressure for the usual wet season offensive up in northeastern Laos by the Meo against the communists in '67-'68 because of the number of casualties that the Meo had received in previous years. So I think there the situation was not quite as good. Not decisively different, but certainly not quite as good as it was in 1965. In northern Laos where the struggle between the communists and the Lao forces was essentially north of Luang Prabang, the royal capital, I don't think there had—there had been back-and-forth gains and losses in that area, but I don't think that situation had changed in any significant way in three years. I'd say the same thing about the Plain of Jars northeast of Vientiane where the neutralist forces were facing the communists. There, there had been the same sort of back and forth tide of victory and sefeat. I would say the same thing essentially characterized the fight in

southern Laos which revolved particularly around the Bolovens Plateau and the area immediately off the plateau, which was the area in which General Pasouk, a Lao general whom I did have great respect for, commanded. Again, the same pattern had developed as in the north and the Plain of Jars, essentially a shifting back and forth between the two sides. The most significant area, of course, was the Ho Chi Minh Trail in eastern Laos adjacent to North Vietnam and South Vietnam through which the North Vietnamese communists were infiltrating troops and armaments into South Vietnam. In that more significant area what was done by the Lao and our support of the Lao really had no effect of any consequence at all. What was occurring there was the secret U.S. air war, so called secret U.S. air war at Souvanna Phouma's insistence against the infiltration. That of course was conducted from outside Laos, conducted from Thailand and Vietnam. There though one couldn't judge what was the tides back and forth between the two sides in an immediate sense, in a longer term we know that the North Vietnamese were gradually increasing their strength in South Vietnam through the infiltration routes. Indeed after the Tet Offensive in Vietnam in 1968 which turned out to be, despite the U.S. press, a military victory for the U.S. but eventually most unfortunately a decisive political defeat for us because of the way the U.S. press and Congress interpreted it. As a result of that Tet Offensive, the guerilla infrastructure within South Vietnam was exposed to retaliation by the South Vietnamese and by the U.S. forces and was pretty well decimated. So that from 1968 on it was North Vietnamese infiltration which played by far the dominant role in the war in South Vietnam. That meant that this infiltration route was much more important and significant. So in the long term sense that situation with respect to eastern Laos was deteriorating as far as we were concerned though we weren't as much aware of it at the time as we became later, of course. So that's pretty much the security situation as I see it in '68 as against '65. As far as the Lao domestic political situation is concerned, I would say that the government of Souvanna Phouma was probably stronger in '68 than in '65. There had been a coup attempt by one of the rightist generals in early '65 against Souvanna. Then there was a brief coup attempt by the chief of the Lao air force against his own armed forces in 1966, both of which failed. In '68 there wasn't any prospect of that sort of thing on the horizons. As a matter of fact, I think that political situation remained pretty much as it was until the communists in effect

began to take over in 1973 and then completed the job of a takeover in ’75 because of broad policy changes by the U.S. in the struggle in the war in Southeast Asia against the North Vietnamese and against the Lao communists. So as far as the economic situation was concerned I’ve also discussed the fact that the Lao budget was in a substantially worse situation in ’68 because the bottom fell out of the international gold market when the U.S. changed the official price of gold and allowed it to become a free market, which gravely affected the Lao budget, which of course was very incidental to the U.S. decision based on much broader factors in our interest. As far as the AID program was concerned, I think we were beginning to make some progress in terms of economic development, but again, that is a slow process and would require years to show any very substantial results. So that’s my overview on the Lao situation in ’68 as against ’65, Laura, unless you have some additional questions.

LC: Very good. No, that’s fine, Joe. I think that’s a great summary of the situation.

JM: The other broad question which you phrased as we were concluding the last time was what effect did the change in administration in 1968 from the Democrat Lyndon Johnson to the Republican Richard Nixon as president have? Again, Laura, it’s one which I think anyone has to give a nuanced answer to.

LC: Sure.

JM: There are some immediate effects in lesser important areas, which I’ll deal with as we go on this morning. In the broadest area of U.S. policy with respect to Laos I don’t think there were any changes whatsoever in U.S. policy between ’68 and ’73. As U.S. policy with respect to Vietnam changed there were effects, of course, with respect to Laos, but they were more or less incidental effects because of the change in our policy in the ’70s. Now this was not so much a Nixon change as a change forced upon him by Congress, led by Democrats who had taken us into the war in Southeast Asia and then had decided in the late ’60s in the majority to bug out. Of course, as the years went on—well, I’ll say that Nixon, immediately after he took over because of the change in political support in the U.S. for the war in Vietnam as a result of the Tet Offensive, I’ll remember that not only was that played by the U.S. press as a military defeat, as I indicated a few minutes ago, but it was also meant that Nixon had to take the loss of popular support

because of the press and the change in the congressional sentiment as a result of this change, particularly in Democratic sentiment, not solely Democratic. There was some Republican opposition to continuation of the support of the war in Southeast Asia, too, but it was mainly Democratic. As a result of that, Nixon, immediately after he took over, realized that he had to begin to reduce U.S. troops in Vietnam. You remember that Johnson had, a few months earlier, turned down General Westmoreland's request for a further increase in the U.S. troop level, which was already over five hundred thousand.

LC: Right.

JM: Johnson turned down Westmoreland's request for additional troops after the Tet Offensive and because Johnson, as you remember, because of the reaction in the U.S. to the Tet Offensive and his very narrow victory in the New Hampshire primary over Sen. Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota made the very surprising decision to withdraw from the presidential race. That, of course, was the beginning of the political change, which you had talked about, which resulted, led eventually to the change in administration. But Nixon, because of the general change in political sentiment in the U.S. with respect to the war in Southeast Asia, knew that he would have to begin to withdraw U.S. forces in Vietnam and try to do it gradually over the first several years of his administration and as a corollary encouraged the Vietnamization of the war, that is increased military activity on the part of the South Vietnamese government. As a matter of fact, the South Vietnamese who also were very surprised and alarmed by the strength of the communist offensive at Tet time and the drive into their cities and the effect on the urban population, the South Vietnamese government was itself very much energized to increase what it was doing and to improve its effectiveness. So that coincided with Nixon's push for Vietnamization of the war, better armaments supplied by the U.S. to the South Vietnamese. I'll mention there that until 1967 McNamara would not even approve supplying the Vietnamese with rifles which were as good as the AK—what is it? Whatever it is.

LC: The AK-47?

JM: Whatever it is, whatever the rifle that came from Russia, which the North Vietnamese were armed with so the South Vietnamese didn't even have a basic kind of armament which was equivalent to what the other side had until '67.

LC: What was the secretary's argument around this?

JM: He didn't trust the South Vietnamese completely. He felt that a lot of them might let the arms slip into the hands of the communists.

LC: I see. Okay.

JM: Yeah. There was a question of confidence. A lot of these things have their echoes today in Iraq as you can see as we go on with this analysis. Nixon tried his best to withdraw troops as slowly as possible, but because of congressional pressure he had to keep up doing it. Then as you recall in 1970 Nixon authorized the incursion into Cambodia, which had served as a sanctuary for the North Vietnamese, a privileged sanctuary with respect to their armed activities in South Vietnam as well as an infiltration route for troops and supplies, particularly for supplies, not so much for troops, supplies through the port of Sihanoukville, [a Nixon decision] which I felt was completely justified, but you also will remember that because U.S. political sentiment had changed so much Nixon had to withdraw U.S. troops within about a month from Cambodia, which was I think was most unfortunate. Since I feel that what was happening in Laos and Cambodia was very relevant to our prospects for success or failure in Vietnam. I think Nixon's basic decision was absolutely right, but because of the political reaction in the U.S. he had to change approach on that. Had the approach in Cambodia been able to continue, I think sooner or later Nixon would also have authorized the U.S. direct ground action against the infiltration routes in Laos, but because of the Cambodian thing all we could do when the South Vietnamese decided to attempt to deal with the Ho Chi Minh Trail in early 1972 was to provide some material support, no troop support, and the South Vietnamese were not strong enough to deal with [the North Vietnamese there] and they had to withdraw pretty quickly and were rather badly mangled in their attempt to deal with that.

LC: Yes.

JM: So had Nixon been successful in Cambodia there could have been a major change because of the change in administration with respect to what was happening in Laos, but it didn't happen, as we know. Then Nixon found himself facing increased opposition in Congress to the continuation of U.S. armed activity in Southeast Asia. Congress began to use its very significant weapon, the power of the purse, to restrict the

use of appropriations in support of U.S. armed activity there. That eventually forced us out completely as you recall.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: So yes. Eventually the change in administration had certain effects as I've indicated, but some of those effects were not so much because of the change in administration, but because of the change in political and particularly the majority congressional sentiment. So that was just as important as the change in administration.

LC: Do you think, Joe, that if President Johnson had made a different decision in March of 1968, if he had decided to continue with his attempt to seek reelection, that the war might have gone differently?

JM: Laura, I think eventually unless Johnson had arrived at a decision to intervene with ground forces in Laos in an effective way against the infiltration of troops and armaments from North Vietnam the answer is no because that provided the significant strategic advantage to North Vietnam, the ability to use the trail essentially unhindered except by air activity. Though that air activity was extensive it could not really dent in any important way the amount of infiltration that was flowing down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As we know, eventually the North Vietnamese even paved roads through Laos and put a pipeline down through it.

LC: That's right.

JM: It shifted in the '70s from guerilla activity, which was no longer effecting the South Vietnamese and we had won the guerilla war by '71-'72. The North Vietnamese shifted to what was really a conventional war against South Vietnam. They attempted in the spring of 1972 to smash South Vietnam through conventional attacks northwest of Saigon and also across the demilitarized zone. Those efforts actually failed because we still had air power. We supported the South Vietnamese very well with that and the South Vietnamese eventually drove them back in both of those areas. But by '73 Congress had cut off all funds even for air activity on our part in Southeast Asia. So that in 1975 by that time, when the North Vietnamese had their excellent improved infiltration routes for conventional forces and even oil for tanks, the situation was grossly reversed. We couldn't come to the assistance [of the South Vietnamese], even though Nixon had promised this in '72 at the time of the conclusion of the negotiations in Paris with the

North Vietnamese. Nixon, his power had been very effectively reduced by Watergate, which was another very, of course, extremely significant factor in what happened in Southeast Asia.

LC: Sure. Uh-huh. Sure.

JM: All this is generally known, Laura, but I'm not sure that many people, even most people, have drawn the correct conclusions from these events in the late '60s and early '70s, but you and I have talked about this several times.

LC: Indeed.

JM: I continue to emphasize because I still feel strongly on it. Nixon said what he was trying to do was to get us out of Southeast Asia on the basis of peace with honor. To me, that is a phrase that covers what—I phrased it differently. I say that he was trying to get us out with the least damage possible to the credibility of our military forces and our military deterrent against current and future enemies. That's the thing to me which is extremely important because if there is no belief that we shall use our armed forces when we are faced with crises then war is going to be much more likely. There were several instances of this kind of effect in subsequent history. One was, of course, the fact that the Russians decided to invade Afghanistan in 1979 because of the change in the domestic political situation there. I think the Russians would have been much more hesitant and much more unlikely to have done this if we had not bugged out or in fact lost the war in South Vietnam. So that was one significant effect and, of course, that led over time, because of our support of the guerillas against the Soviets in Afghanistan, led to training of the Muslim guerillas in guerilla activity. We can see what's happening today, which is partly a consequence of what happened in Afghanistan. History is a continuum, Laura. You can't see what's happening very often immediately, but the ill effects of grossly erroneous decisions politically and militarily can have an effect over twenty-five or thirty years. I think, of course, one of the reasons that we're facing such a problem in Iraq is that the anti-U.S. forces there think that if they hold out long enough we'll do the same thing we did in Vietnam and that is bug out.

LC: Undoubtedly that's the expectation. Of course that's—yes.

JM: That's motivation for them for what they do.

LC: Absolutely, and great for recruitment and so on.

JM: Laura, maybe we've talked enough about it.

LC: Okay, yes. We'll come back to some of these themes.

JM: I feel strongly on this. I think we wouldn't have had a Gulf War in the early 1990s if we hadn't lost the war in Vietnam because I think then Saddam Hussein would have been much more respectful of what he could anticipate as our reaction because of his move into Kuwait. These things I think are all connected.

LC: Well, and I think, Joe, it's very useful for people who are listening to see the threads all gathered up as you've done and assessed in a way that has thematic sense over time, which is what I think most people would like to have all foreign affairs explained to them as clearly as what you've just said. Let's go ahead and track back to your own personal experience.

JM: Laura, what I would like to do is to make a few supplementary remarks on Laos before we leave that.

LC: Oh, okay. I would appreciate that.

JM: I would like to say, looking at this now in a personal sense and not in any broad sense, looking back on my three years in Laos I feel, Laura, that that was the most intensive, exciting, and in many ways the most challenging assignment of my career. The one in Vietnam, of course, had been in a way more significant in dealing with the political and military problems in Vietnam, but my influence on those had been significant only during the first year-and-a-half or so of my assignment in Vietnam. When Nolting took over as ambassador my influence, as I've indicated during our discussion of that, declined considerably. I didn't feel as though I was involved as much during the latter part of my stay in Vietnam as I had been earlier, whereas in Laos I continued to be extremely involved in the AID program there. I think it had considerable importance for the U.S. and for our policy in Southeast Asia. I look back on that as a really great experience in my life. I have no real regrets about having served there at all. I may have made some errors, but I think by and large what I did was correct from the standpoint of U.S. interests. I sum up by quoting Polonius from *Hamlet*. "Above all to thine own self be true," even though some of the decisions I made during the latter part of my stay had some adverse effect on my own career, but I still think what I did was correct, not only personally but in terms of U.S. interests. So I'll wind up that part of it,

Laura, with that assessment.

LC: Very good.

JM: I do want to add one footnote, and this gets a bit out of whack chronologically, because this occurred after I had received my new assignment. I left Laos on what I thought was going to be home leave in June and the blow from Souvanna Phouma indicating that he didn't want me to come back also took place in June. By August I was in my new assignment. My boss asked me to go to Vietnam with him on a visit. The assignment was in Washington and I was asked to go to Vietnam with him on a visit and then Bill Sullivan, our ambassador in Laos, learned about that. He said, "I want you to come up here so that I can give you a proper farewell party in view of the position you held and what you did for Laos." So I went up for a weekend in late August. First I met at the AID mission and held an open house in my office and met with any of my staff who wanted to come in to say goodbye and to discuss what we had done. Then later that evening, Bill Sullivan had a big reception to say farewell to me and the diplomatic corps turned up, all of the officials of the Lao government except Souvanna Phouma. I felt very good about that. I think the goodbye I felt most moved by was from Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Insisiengmay, who as I have indicated, was not a demonstrative individual, a bit enigmatic in dealings. But I remember as he went through the receiving line or I guess the goodbye line to say goodbye, he held my hand for quite some time in his, pressed it very warmly, and said, "I want to say to you that you've done a great deal for Laos." I think that's the memory I like to take away with me from that reception. I might add that when the communists took over Leuam did stay on in Laos, not because he was a communist at all—I've indicated that his two sons both died in the war against the communists—but because he felt he could not adjust, I'm sure, to living anywhere else outside of Laos. Whether he was ever taken into reeducation camp, or concentration camp as I prefer to call it, I don't know. I never heard what ultimately became of him, but I do have that very warm memory from that reception. Then later that evening Bill Sullivan held his traditional dinner to honor any senior person departing from the U.S. mission in Laos with the heads of all the agencies operating in Laos at the dinner. So that was a fine farewell I felt on the part of my good friend Bill Sullivan for me. I had one other thing, Laura. About two months later in Washington, Souvanna

Phouma was on a visit to the States and I got an invitation from the Lao embassy in Washington to a reception in his honor. Nonie and I went to the reception. Souvanna Phouma, who was the one who had asked that I not come back, of course, was very cool, formal, and perfunctory in the receiving line and obviously no longer felt any warmth whatsoever as far as I was concerned. So he hadn't changed his attitude but Sisouk, the minister of finance and the prospective successor whenever Souvanna turned over power as prime minister, Sisouk, who had in my last few weeks in Laos turned from being a very close friend to refusing to speak to me because of the financial pressure I was putting on Laos. Sisouk was just as warm as he could be. He was at this cocktail party and I heard that Sisouk after I left Laos was very sorry for the kind of conduct he had used toward me during the last few weeks I was there. So his attitude obviously had changed, but Souvanna's hadn't. Well, with that Laura I wind up Laos.

LC: Okay. All right, Joe. Can you say a little bit then about how—and I believe you prefaced this in our last session but one—how you came to find your next position? Of course, you were—

JM: Laura, that's what I'd like to deal with next.

LC: Sure.

JM: I've already indicated that in May of '68 when Bill Sullivan went back to Washington on consultation he took up at my request the possibility of an ambassadorial assignment for me with Katzenbach, the number two in the State Department. Katzenbach's reply was that the Johnson administration was on its way out and was no longer appointing any ambassadors. There's an indication, Laura, of what a change in administration—how it affected me personally. They were no longer appointing any ambassadors. So for the next several months I knew there wouldn't be any possibility in that area. So that's when I agreed to go back to Laos for a second tour, which also of course, was countermanded by Souvanna in June. When I got this word that Souvanna didn't want me to come back I immediately, of course, began to think of my future assignment. I've already indicated to you I think that Bill Bundy, the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs in the State Department, offered me the job of director of the Vietnam Working Group. He was aware that I had been the Vietnam desk officer in the late '50s and director of the Vietnam Working Group in the early '60s. So this was really

taking me back to a lower-level position than I had held even in the last year under Bundy where I was an office director because the director of the Vietnam Working Group was not really even an office director level because he was in the office of Southeast Asian Affairs as a deputy director at the same time he was director of the Vietnam Working Group. So it really was a come down even from my last year in Washington, let alone the position I had held in Laos. So I turned this down very quickly because I felt that in effect it was a demotion rank-wise. I didn't really want to serve under Bundy again because I've indicated to you that though Bundy and I were in the same class in law school at Harvard in '40 and '41, we didn't know each other, but that established no bond between us because I always felt he was sort of supercilious and condescending in his attitude toward me. So I didn't want to really serve with Bundy. So I turned that one down very quickly. The second offer that I received was from John Steves, the director general of the Foreign Service who telephoned me actually at home since I was on leave. He telephoned me at home one day to offer me a job as a senior inspector of embassies and consulates abroad. I very promptly declined that one, too, because I didn't want to be separated from Nonie or I didn't want our youngest daughter to be separated from us. The other two were already in schools away from us. So I turned that one down pretty quickly, too. Then AID, Bill Gaud who was the head of AID and Rutherford Poats who was the number two, both wanted me to stay on in AID because they had liked my job I had done in Laos, valued it highly. First we discussed the possibility of another AID mission abroad. Well, the only things that might become open—Tunisia looked as though it would become open and Morocco might become open fairly soon, but neither was really a very significant program, much smaller in importance, of course, than the one in Laos.

LC: Can you give a sense of what the dollar figure size was so that people might be able to appreciate?

JM: Well, I don't really remember. I would say both of those programs were in the low million dollars whereas our program in Laos was fifty million for economic aid and a hundred and fifty million for military aid. It was the second biggest AID mission in the world after Vietnam.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: In that sense it was a real comedown. So I wasn't enthusiastic about either of those prospects. In fact, the job that both Gaud and Poats wanted me to take was as the deputy to Jim Grant in the Vietnam Bureau. That position had recently fallen vacant and they were pressing me to take that. Jim Grant wanted me to take it also. So I decided that *faute de mieux*, as the French say, for lack of anything better that I would take this at least as a waiting proposition for several months until the Republicans took over to see whether there was any chance of an ambassadorial assignment opening up. So I did take that one. Interestingly, Laura, I was told by the AID people that I must not give any indication either professionally by assuming any overt action in this position or by any personal moves such as getting our effects out of storage in Washington and shipping the others from Laos, that I assumed this was going to take place because they said, "If you do and it comes to Lyndon Johnson's attention then he is more likely to say no because," he said, "Then you're presuming on presidential power." So this indicated that Johnson's hand reached all the way down to deputy assistant administrators in AID.

LC: Wow.

JM: That was an interesting indication of how Johnson conducted himself politically. I got another indication before I was affirmed by him in this position. One day I got a visit from an AID official asking me whether I was a Democrat or not and that this was very important in the decision by Johnson as to whether I would get the job or not. I was very surprised that politics would extend all the way down to that level of government, but I answered truthfully. I said, "Yes. I am a Democrat," but I didn't indicate that I was strongly leaning toward voting for Nixon, a Republican, for president. He was the first Republican that I would have voted for in my life. But my answer that I was a Democrat led pretty quickly to the confirmation of my assignment by Lyndon Johnson and pretty soon it was all official. I could begin to undertake things officially and we began to cease living on borrowed time, Nonie and I, as far as our future was concerned. We could really begin to set up our household in the house we had owned for several years in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, but I thought it was interesting how all this worked as far as Johnson—it was interesting to see how Johnson really operated. He was still the politician to his fingertips, obviously. I think I have described the Vietnam Bureau briefly before, but I'll do it again. The Vietnam Bureau in AID had

been created at Johnson's absolute insistence in 1967. He was the major figure pushing the elevation of Vietnam to a separate bureau in AID. Bureaus in AID had always been whole continents before: East Asia, Latin America, Africa, and so on. But he insisted that Vietnam be elevated to a bureau. Again, this he looked at as a political move, as showing that he was giving every emphasis he could to winning the war in Southeast Asia, even down to creating a separate bureau in AID which would show politically that he was out to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese in the war in that country.

LC: Sure.

JM: So this was very much a Johnson move. Jim Grant, who was a very respected figure in AID, was chosen as head of the bureau. Jim had been general counsel, that is the leading legal officer for AID, earlier and was director of the AID mission in Turkey, I think, at the time that he was selected to head the Vietnam Bureau. I liked Jim Grant very much and respected him very deeply. I was delighted to work for Jim both personally and professionally. The bureau very quickly mushroomed into 450 employees in Washington. Let me say at this point, Laura, that Washington cannot really run an AID program directly in a foreign country. That's run by the mission in the country. What AID can do in Washington is to make policy decisions, provide the personnel and the money for the AID program, but the AID program has to be carried out in the field. It just can't be done from Washington. So, 450 people for the jobs of the bureau, which I just described, was clearly excessive, but because of Johnson's emphasis on this nobody in AID felt that he could hold it down until Johnson made the decision that he was not running for president any longer. Bill Gaud—now, this was in July of 1968, about three months or more after Johnson had made his decision not to run. Bill Gaud told me that what he wanted me to do and concentrate on as the deputy assistant administrator in the Vietnam Bureau, was to cut down the grossly excessive personnel strength for me. He said, "I'm not going to give you a figure to cut to, but any decisions you make I'll back you." So I had in effect pretty much *carte blanche* in that respect as far as Gaud was concerned. Clearly Gaud had decided upon this reduction because Johnson was on his way out. He wouldn't have dared to make this decision at an earlier time. Also interesting, Laura, that as an effect of changes in administration, this decision of Gaud to cut back substantially—excuse me—on the strength of the Vietnam Bureau.

So Laura, as we go on you can see some immediate effects of changes in administration.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: Not as significant as the ones we talked to in the longer term, but there are some immediate effects.

LC: Right. It's always the case that there are effects both outward and downward of any kind of change. You've laid those out very cleanly. Let's take a break there, Joe.

JM: Okay, Laura, fine. We can resume there the next time.

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I'm continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. It's the eighth of December 2006. The ambassador is speaking by phone from his home. Joe, you and I have already been talking a little bit, but it's time now for us to turn, I think, back to your career. 1968, I believe, is where we were. Can you pick up the story?

Joseph Mendenhall: I think we ended the last time about a month or more ago. We were talking about the fact that I had just been named the deputy assistant administrator of the Vietnam Bureau in the Agency for International Development, the economic aid agency in Washington. The head of that agency had charged me with the primary responsibility of drastically reducing the size of that bloated Vietnam Bureau, which had been created a year earlier at President Lyndon Johnson's urging and had grown rapidly to 450 people. Now that Johnson was on his way out as president and Gaud felt he could really take some action to reduce the waste that was involved in this extreme buildup, charged me with this function of cutting the numbers there. He said, "I won't give you a figure. I trust your judgment, but whatever you decide I shall back you." So that was the primary charge I got from the head of the agency. Over the next year-and-a-half I did succeed in cutting that bureau just about in half from 450. I can tell you, Laura, it was not an easy thing. There were many trials and tribulations as there always are in trying to cut staff in any U.S. agency. In the first place it's virtually impossible to fire anybody from the U.S. government. It can be done, but it's a long, tedious process. Therefore, one has to seek other ways to cut the size of staff if one is going to do it rapidly.

LC: Joe, may I just ask for clarification, the employees would have been civil service appointees? Is that correct?

JM: Well, I think some were civil service and some were—I think by that time the AID had developed a career service which was governed by the Foreign Service Act of 1946 as it had been changed and amended over the years just as the regular Foreign Service in the State Department was, but the AID part of it was operated separately from

the State Department Foreign Service system.

LC: So it had its own career—

JM: The governing act was the same. Some of those people were AID Foreign Service and some of them were civil service. It was a mixture of the two.

LC: Okay.

JM: Now, what we tried to do first, of course, was to try to help anybody who was being eliminated to find a vacancy in either the AID agency or elsewhere in the government. That took care of some of the people, but then there were quite a lot of others, of course, for whom no obvious vacancies existed. These people whose jobs were being eliminated would take advantage of the civil service system of bumping. Under the civil service where rank is in the position and not in the person as it is in the Foreign Service Act, a civil service person whose job is eliminated, but whose civil service status remains intact can bump anybody else elsewhere in the government in a position of a similar kind whom he outranks.

LC: Based on seniority, number of years of service?

JM: By seniority, exactly. So that a number of these people engaged in this sort of activity in order to retain their position in government by taking a position held by somebody else, who would I suppose then try to do the same thing to those lower down the totem pole than he was. This was a way in which quite a number were placed. One can imagine that with almost all these cases, particularly those who couldn't find a position elsewhere in the government, a lot of them would resort to their congressman. So I had lots of telephone calls and letters from members of Congress asking about and often protesting what was happening to their constituent Johnny. So after a year-and-a-half of this long and tedious activity, I had succeeded in getting it down by about half. I thought that was success as far as I was concerned.

LC: Well, it's a major accomplishment. I mean, you're talking about over two hundred people.

JM: Exactly.

LC: Joe, just for people who might be listening to this part and may not have listened to all of the previous sessions, you were selected for this position by Bill Gaud.

JM: That's right. Bill Gaud and Jim Grant. Jim Grant recommended me to Bill

Gaud and Bill approved it.

LC: This was in part—

JM: Jim Grant was an assistant administrator of the Vietnam Bureau and Gaud, as I've indicated, was the head of the agency.

LC: You reported directly to Grant?

JM: Yes, exactly.

LC: Joe, I just wanted to—

JM: The reason that Grant and Gaud wanted me in the position was because I had been three years as the AID mission director in Laos and had established a very good record as far as AID was concerned. They were impressed with the job I had done in Laos.

LC: Which involved some trimming of—

JM: Well, not so much trimming of personnel there—

LC: Not positions, but of money.

JM: But spending of other costs and using the money thus made available for economic development purposes.

LC: Absolutely. So your administrative—I know you're very modest, but your administrative acumen had been demonstrated clearly at the AID mission in Laos in Vientiane. So this was a natural—

JM: I'll say that's right because I didn't know before I got to Laos whether I was an effective manager or not because I don't think I'd ever had more than, oh, five to ten people underneath me during my Foreign Service career prior to that time.

LC: Which is pretty incredible to jump to essentially running a fifty million dollar—

JM: Running five hundred Americans, six hundred third-country nationals, and two thousand Lao, as I think I said earlier, the second biggest employer in Laos after the Lao government.

LC: Yeah, I mean this is a CEO's (chief executive officer) job. There's no question about it.

JM: Right. Right.

LC: Joe, can you say a little bit about Bill Gaud and your relationship to him

during this process? Was he checking off? How closely was he involved and how closely was Grant involved?

JM: I'm sure he was aware in general of what was going on. I didn't report to him specifically, but I'm sure he learned from Jim Grant what was gradually happening because this was a very gradual process over the year-and-a-half, of course. So I don't recall seeing Gaud specifically subsequent to the charge he gave me on the progress that was being made, but I'm sure he was aware of it. Actually, within about six months Bill himself had left the agency, as there was a change in administration from Johnson to Nixon. Dr. Hannah, John Hannah, who was the president of Michigan State University, was chosen by Nixon as the successor to Gaud.

LC: Well, you know that's my alma mater.

JM: Well, that's what I thought.

LC: You'll have to be a little careful.

JM: I'll be going into my relationship with Hannah to a considerable degree today and in subsequent sessions.

LC: Very good.

JM: Yes. I certainly did have a considerable interrelationship with Hannah over the year or about a year that he was there and I was still in AID also. So there will be considerable interpersonal relationship there. Laura, the only other personnel matter that I would like to raise is that I think the greatest trouble I had with respect to personnel didn't relate to this reduction in numbers, but through my dealings with one of my subordinates in the Vietnam Bureau. The Vietnam Bureau was organized so that Grant was the assistant administrator, I was the deputy assistant administrator and then underneath us were four heads of the principal activities of the bureau. The four of them reported to me and to Grant. Now one of those heads was the one who was in charge of administration, Johnny Johnston. Interestingly enough, Johnston had been at the University of Delaware when I was there. I think he was a year ahead of me. I'm not sure. I didn't really know him there. After graduation from college—he must have graduated in '39 and I in '40—he became associated during World War II very closely with Nelson Rockefeller who was in charge of our development relations with Latin America, and I think operated fairly independently of others who were related to Latin

America, had his own staff. Johnston, I think, became one of his assistants in some manner. Anyway, he rose very quickly in government circles because of this. I guess eventually switched to the AID agency. I don't know when this happened, but he certainly was a career AID man when I came to know him again in 1968. He was as, I say, a career AID employee, not a career State Department Foreign Service employee. I think this probably was one of the reasons for some resentment of me on his part. The fact that you go to the same school is usually regarded as a bond between people, but that has not always been my experience by any means. I think that sort of contributed to the relationship between Johnston and me. He had done quite well earlier in his AID career. He had risen to be the AID mission director in Mexico. I don't know how long he held that position prior to the time I came to know him again in 1968, but it was clear that his career had stalled in AID. He no longer had a mission director position. He was to a degree down the line as one of the four reporting to me and to Grant. I think he was well aware of that and I think that also annoyed him, particularly the fact that I was a career Foreign Service officer over him and really dealing with a function which could have been delegated by Grant and Gaud to him as head of the administration to cut the numbers of these people. So I was never sure in my dealings with him whether I could trust him completely because of his attitude toward me. The nadir of our relationship was reached toward the end of 1968 when Jim Grant charged me with preparing the annual efficiency reports or evaluation reports on the four men who were in charge of the functional activities of the Bureau.

LC: Right.

JM: As soon as Johnston learned of that he rushed to Grant and said, "I want you to prepare mine, not Mendenhall," and Grant agreed. Actually, I was relieved that I didn't have to engage in this activity on somebody with whom my relationship was not very good at all. So Jim himself prepared the report on Johnston and interestingly enough within a short time thereafter Johnston himself elected to leave the Vietnam Bureau. He took some kind of a staff position in AID somewhere, not a very significant one. I never heard anything more about him. He slipped out of my ken completely, but that was a very difficult relationship for the first five or six months of my tenure as the deputy assistant administrator of AID.

LC: Was he actively—

JM: Of the Vietnam Bureau, not of AID, excuse me.

LC: No, it's fine. This may be a little tender so, of course, you can decline or say whatever you like, but I'm just wondering whether because of the very difficult process that you were involved in, was there a sense that he was kind of actively undermining what you were trying to do or was he participating?

JM: I don't think he did actually, but I never quite trusted him. I don't think he did because he knew I had the hundred percent support of Gaud, the head of the agency. So I think he had to be a bit wary in that respect, Laura.

LC: So he was smart enough not to be doing that anyway.

JM: He was a very smart guy and he was a good operator, that I will say. Now, Laura, I think now I can move on to Jim Grant who was the head of the Vietnam Bureau when I came in. I don't know whether the last time I gave a brief thumbnail sketch of Jim's origins. Maybe I did the last time.

LC: If you could maybe you should go ahead and go over that because I'm just looking.

JM: Well, anyway, Jim was born of missionary parents in China. He had been associated with AID for well over a decade, I think. He rose to become the general counsel, the leading legal official in AID, I believe as early as sometime in the 1950s. It may have been the early '60s. Then he was the AID mission director in Turkey when he was chosen to head the newly-created Vietnam Bureau in 1967. So Jim had had a very successful career in AID. He's an extremely able person. I had and still have in retrospect a very high regard for Jim and his ability. He and I, I think, collaborated quite closely and effectively during the period that I worked with him. I'll indicate a little later that lasted really only five or six months and I'll explain why. I want to go through the first thing that Jim and I did. Almost immediately after my position was confirmed as the deputy assistant administrator, Jim said, "I'm planning to go to Vietnam on a trip and I want you to go with me." I was a bit surprised that he would take both of us, both the principal officials in the bureau, away at the same time, but since I hadn't been in Vietnam for three years and a half I readily agreed to go with him. That was when I also went up to Laos for the farewell, which I think I've described in detail in earlier sessions.

LC: Yes.

JM: So Jim and I, I think we flew for twenty-eight hours from Washington to Saigon. It was a pretty long trip at that point. We made a lot of stops in between and, of course, I think we had to change in Hong Kong, maybe Tokyo, to a different plane in order to get—maybe we changed twice in order to get to Saigon. Anyway, we arrived in Saigon shortly after the second rather substantial offensive by the Vietnamese communists against the Vietnamese government and people. The first as you recall was in Tet in 1968 in February. In early August there was a second, not as big or as extensive by any means as the first, but it was also an important one from the communist standpoint. When we arrived we found that Don McDonald, who was the AID mission director in Vietnam, in bed with the flu. The surprising thing was to me in any rate, I think he had his bedroom door locked and he had a rifle on the bed beside him. Perhaps this was partly because of the weakness associated with his illness, looked rather frightened and withdrawn. It's true that during the Tet offensive in 1968, the communists did penetrate extensively into Saigon, including into the American embassy compound as you recall, but that had not happened in the August one. So Jim and I, I think, were both a little surprised to find this kind of reaction on McDonald's part. In any case, Jim and I attended a country team meeting presided over by Amb. Ellsworth Bunker. I think you will be interested in seeing the line-up of officials who attended that country team meeting. We had three ambassadors in Vietnam at that point. Bunker, of course, was the top ambassador. His deputy, Sam Berger, a career Foreign Service officer, also had an ambassadorial title. I think Johnson had conferred that—oh, he conferred that as early as 1964 on the number two in the embassy in Saigon. That wasn't true in any other diplomatic mission in the world that the number two held an ambassadorial title. Then the third ambassador was Bob Komer who was the head pacification program, which I'll go into in a moment. That was a very interesting development. Then also present at the country team meeting were General Abrams, the four-star general in charge of the U.S. military in Vietnam, and the heads of the various other American agencies operating in Vietnam. It was quite a large meeting to see all these people in session there.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JM: Jim and I also were invited by a number of my old Vietnamese friends for

social occasions in their houses. I mention this because Jim himself mentioned it later in a very favorable light about the effective relations I had with the Vietnamese and the evaluation report he made on me before he left the AID agency. I had maintained relations with a number of these people even though I had left Vietnam six years earlier. So that I was able to resume them and I think Jim was impressed that they were not only formal relations, but very informal, friendly, first name relations that I had with a number of the Vietnamese officials at that time. Jim and I also decided to—well, first we made a helicopter trip over Saigon itself. Saigon had been extensively damaged, particularly during the Tet Offensive. AID was engaging in a very large-scale program of reconstruction of the housing that had been destroyed. Many people found their houses destroyed and had no place to live. So AID was engaging this. We could see the very large-scale housing development that was occurring in the city as we flew over. It also was impressive to see the extent of the damage during the Tet Offensive six months earlier. Jim and I flew to Hue and Da Nang up in the north part of South Vietnam, what is really central Vietnam, to be briefed and to look at the situation in those areas. Hue in particular had been even more heavily damaged during the Tet Offensive in Saigon because the communists actually held Hue for about three weeks and had killed, I think, something like twenty-five hundred people whom they were eliminating. They were trying to eliminate the principal anti-communist people in the city during the course of the time they held that city. It was finally recaptured by our troops and the South Vietnamese operating together. Of course, a program of very wide-scale help was being engaged in that area. One of the interesting events that occurred to Jim and me while we were in the Hue area, we went to visit one of the old Vietnamese emperor's palaces outside the city. Not the one farthest away, which I had visited earlier, which I think is about forty kilometers out. I don't think that was the Minh Mang residence and I don't think that was sufficiently secured to go out there. This one was, I think, about twelve kilometers or miles outside Hue. So Jim and I went out to visit this palace. While we were there walking around the grounds, suddenly we heard shots begin to ring out. Well, he and I both looked at each other and began to wonder whether we—since the area was not totally secure whether we were surrounded by the communists and were about to be taken captive. It turned out that it was some friendly Vietnamese that said, "Oh, this is

just some of our own soldiers firing off weapons." So it turned out not to be serious. Jim in particular recalled that in [1948] an identical experience had occurred to him on the outskirts of Peking when he actually was taken prisoner and hostage by the Chinese communists and held before he was exchanged or released. He said, he thought, "Boy, this is where history repeats itself as far as I'm concerned," until the situation was clarified. So that was an incident that certainly has engraved itself, I'm sure engraved itself on Jim's mind as well as mine.

LC: Now mine. That's pretty shocking. Yes.

JM: It was a very interesting thing. Let me look at my notes here, Laura. What's the next thing I wanted to talk about? I think that was in essence our trip to Vietnam, very enlightening as far as we were concerned, very useful.

LC: May I just ask if the AID mission in Vietnam had regional offices that, for example in Da Nang, you would have been visiting?

JM: Oh, yes, because what I wanted to do, Laura, before I get away from this is describe CORDS and that will answer your question.

LC: Okay. Sure.

JM: CORDS, which is the pacification program—CORDS stood for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development and the "S" was System. I can't remember now. Anyway, to me, a very un-meaningful title for an extremely important organization and activity. I think I had said earlier, Laura—I know I had said during the time I was dealing with my own experience in Vietnam that I was chairman of the subcommittee of U.S. agency officers in Vietnam, which produced the first counter-insurgency plan, which was good as far as it went, but certainly as subsequent events showed there was not nearly adequate to cover the situation as it developed. Over the subsequent years from 1960—this was the end of '60 and beginning of '61—then until 1967 the U.S. experimented with various counter-insurgency approaches in Vietnam, again somewhat reminiscent of Iraq isn't it, Laura?

LC: It is. Yes.

JM: In order to try to come up with an effective mechanism to deal with the insurgency. It was not really until 1967 that the U.S. really began to develop an approach which turned out to be successful because by 1970 or '71, we and the South Vietnamese

had won the guerilla war, which we eventually lost on a conventional basis, as I think I've said a number of times during our interviews, but I'm going to describe how the successful counter-insurgency approach evolved. In the White House in Washington under Lyndon Johnson, who of course is paying extreme attention to Vietnam, a fellow by the name of Robert Komer had been placed in charge of Vietnam, I suppose on what was the National Security Council staff. Incidentally, Komer had worked for my stepfather in CIA in 1949. Maybe it was '51, '49 or '51 when I met him in Washington. Komer was just starting out then in his career, worked for my stepfather. I remember meeting him at dinner at my stepfather's apartment. Komer had, by that time, risen very well in the U.S. government and as I say was the principal National Security staff man on Vietnam with direct and I think frequent access to Lyndon Johnson. He had come to impress Johnson very, very greatly. His influence, backed by Johnson, was extensive. Komer was the kind of guy who—well, his nickname, a rather derogatory nickname, was "The Blowtorch." You've probably heard of that.

LC: I've read that, yes.

JM: Komer could be an extremely abrasive individual. He was very, very able but nobody was more cognizant of that than Komer himself. He could really create waves, but he was extremely effective. Komer, in this position, evolved the system that became CORDS in Vietnam, the successful pacification program. He was the one who convinced Johnson that what needed to be done in order to ensure that the pacification program achieved sufficient priority and attention, particularly from our military, was to make the man in charge of the pacification program a deputy to the commanding general of U.S. forces in Vietnam and with the rank of ambassador. So at Komer's recommendation, Johnson created this system so that the commanding general, who at that time was Westmoreland, had two deputies, one for regular military activities, another four-star general, and one for pacification activities. Komer was named by Johnson as the ambassador in charge of the pacification program in that number two position for pacification to the commanding general. Since the military knew that Komer had the one thousand percent backing of Johnson and had direct access to him, that gave Komer sufficient prestige and authority with the military that he was able to get everything he needed for the pacification program. What he did was to set up a system with the

headquarters for the pacification program obviously in Saigon near the commanding general. By that time Vietnam was divided for military purposes into four corps areas geographically. Komer created a structure for CORDS, similar to what the Vietnamese had established in these corps areas. Our military operated in accordance with this same system, the corps area system. So a parallel structure was set up by Komer in the headquarters of the four CORDS areas. The CORDS part of it extended down to province and district level so that CORDS was operating not only at the top in Saigon, not only at the intermediate province level, but right down at the district level which had really never been effectively established by Americans. What we did was operate as advisors and actual operators with the Vietnamese at all these levels. In effect, we were intervening much more deeply in the operations of the South Vietnamese government than we had ever done before in order to try to make sure that the kind of efficiency and coordination which was necessary for a successful counter-insurgency program was achieved. Now the personnel whom Komer got for this—he created an organization of about six thousand, manned mainly by U.S. military officers but also with quite a number of [Foreign Service], AID, CIA and U.S. Information Service personnel also assigned to him. At the corps level and the province level the military assigned to him, the chief ones were with the rank of colonel. So obviously Komer was not operating with lower-ranking military people, as he should not have been. He had sufficient priority he could get virtually anybody he wanted assigned to CORDS. So this was the organization that was set up by Komer in order to deal with counter-insurgency. Now the other significant development in the counter-insurgency field was the replacement of General Westmoreland as the commanding general by General Abrams in 1968. Abrams had been the deputy to Westmoreland for at least a year prior to this time. Contrary to Westmoreland, Abrams himself was convinced that counter-insurgency was an extremely important element in the war in Vietnam. So he accepted wholeheartedly this organization that had been erected by Komer. With Abrams's backing and Komer's management of it, this program really began to operate successfully. By the end of '68—not even by the end, by November of '68—Komer felt that he was being so successful—I think he exaggerated the degree of success at that point—so successful that he left Vietnam and Lyndon Johnson nominated him as ambassador to Turkey. This was the

beginning of November of 1968. Johnson was no longer appointing any ambassadors, though he did appoint Komer to this position. Dean Rusk himself swore Komer in and I remember Jim Grant and I were in Rusk's office for the swearing in. Actually, Komer could not get confirmation by the Senate in this position. So three months later he was out as ambassador after Nixon had taken over, which was unfortunate in a way because I have great admiration for Komer's ability even though he was not an easy person to get along with in this world or to work for. Since the Republicans had taken over the government as a result of the 1968 election, Komer at that time was completely out, but I give him the credit for establishing the—for having the kind of I don't know whether to call it gall or what—to convince Lyndon Johnson that this was the kind of approach that should be needed. I think it was and I think it was successful in Vietnam. Unfortunately, I think I'll end on this point, Laura.

LC: Sure, okay.

JM: Unfortunately I don't think that anybody has tried or succeeded in doing this in connection with the Iraq war. I think it's something that in our history should be studied more by both the military and civilian elements of our government than there has been, particularly when it's been successful. Of course, the trouble is a lot of people think the Vietnam War was totally lost and nobody wants to look at it for any guidance, but I think that's wrong. I'll leave it at that, Laura, but by strong feeling.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [52] of [57]
Date: December 15, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I'm continuing our oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the fifteenth of December 2006. Joe, if you would, I would very much like to pick up the story as we closed it last week.

Joseph Mendenhall: Yes, right. We were discussing the establishment of CORDS, C-O-R-D-S, which was the acronym for an organization the name of which is not very meaningful, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development and I've forgotten what the "S" is for. [Support].

LC: I didn't look it up any. I'm sorry.

JM: Anyway, in a nutshell it was the pacification program in Vietnam, which was established in 1967. The driving force in doing it was Robert Komer, who was the man responsible for Vietnam in the National Security Council on President Lyndon Johnson's staff, had direct access to Johnson. After he got Johnson's approval for the organizational setup he devised then he went out to Vietnam to head it with the rank of ambassador. He was the third American ambassador in the U.S. mission in Vietnam, as I described the last time.

LC: Joe, would something like that, may I just ask about the ambassadorial rank? Would something like that have rankled some people in the Foreign Service?

JM: Laura, I find that hard to answer. It certainly didn't rankle me because I thought the pacification program was of overwhelming importance and that the man who headed a successful one should have the rank of ambassador, plus the fact that despite Bob Komer's reputation as shown by his nickname of—oh, what did I say it was the last time, "The Blowtorch"—that Komer was a man of very great ability, a characteristic which he was well aware of himself. As a matter of fact I might say, Laura, that he went out in the summer of '67. By late 1968, I think October of '68, he felt that the program was sufficiently well established. He was convinced it was on the way to success. A lot of other people thought that it was too early to say so, but Komer was absolutely convinced that he was proceeding very, very well indeed. He resigned and President

Lyndon Johnson nominated him, as I've indicated, as ambassador to Turkey in November of '68. Well, Johnson as you know was shortly on his way out as president.

LC: Yes.

JM: Komer was, as I indicated last time, was never confirmed by the Senate. After three months in Turkey with a new Republican president, he was no longer the ambassador and was in fact in the political opposition then until the Democrats came back in in '76. Then he was nominated by Carter to one of the high policy jobs in the Pentagon. I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was a very good position. Komer has since died. What I would like—unless you want to ask me some more questions about Komer.

LC: No. Please go ahead.

JM: Komer was succeeded as the head of CORDS. As I explained the last time, the head of CORDS not only had the rank of ambassador, he was one of the deputy commandants of the U.S. military forces in Vietnam. The military forces had a commanding general who was General Westmoreland until he was succeeded by General Abrams in the summer of '68. Komer was one of the two deputy commanders. He was responsible for pacification. The other deputy commander was responsible for regular U.S. military operations in Vietnam. When Komer left William Colby, Bill Colby, became his successor. Bill Colby, whom I think I've mentioned a number of times in our discussions.

LC: Yes.

JM: Bill Colby, when I went to Vietnam in 1959, was the number two in the CIA mission stationed in Saigon. By I think the summer of '60 he had become the head of that station through the normal transfer operations. So he remained in Vietnam almost all the time that I stayed there. He left about a month or two before I did in 1962 heading what was then I suppose—or not suppose, what was then certainly one of the most important CIA stations in the world. When he left he went back to Washington as the head of the Far East Division of the CIA, which was one of the top positions in the agency. So Colby had obviously made a very good reputation for himself while he was in Saigon and went back from being station chief to this very significant position, which he held for I would say around five years. When CORDS was set up by Bob Komer in

Vietnam, Colby, I don't know whether at the outset or shortly thereafter, elected to go out to Vietnam as a member of Komer's staff, which in a number of ways was a step down in terms of the relative ranking of the position he took. Colby was so interested and so convinced that what we were doing in Vietnam was important and that we should do it right that he elected to take what in effect was a step down in the importance of his position to be on Komer's staff as the head of one of the divisions in CORDS. Of course, since Colby was an able individual himself that so impressed Komer that when Komer left he recommended Colby as his successor. Colby took over the position then as the head of CORDS, also with the rank of ambassador and with the same number two as one of the two deputies of the commanding general in October of 1968. Colby remained in that position until the summer of 1971. He'd had a family tragedy in the meantime. One of the children who suffered from epilepsy had died and his wife needed him in Washington. So by '71 he decided to go back to Washington. What actually turned out was that no successor was ever named to Colby as the head of CORDS by the Nixon administration because at that point U.S. forces were being drawn down so fast that the Nixon administration decided it would not name a successor. That operation would be phased out just as the U.S. military operations would be phased out over the next couple of years. So that in a nutshell—and I'll go into this at greater length.

LC: Very good.

JM: We arrive at that point, Laura, because my personal interests became very involved as you'll see from what I describe in subsequent sessions in that CORDS position. So that affected me very considerably, as you'll see, but I'll leave all that to the future.

LC: Okay.

JM: Anyway, that is the way CORDS evolved in terms of leadership over the years it was in existence. As I have said, Colby was convinced and I am convinced that by 1970 or '71 the final success in establishing a really effective counter-insurgency organization led to victory in the counter-insurgency war by '70 or '71, not that it can all be attributed to the U.S. The South Vietnamese contributed quite substantially to that as well because we were integrated closely with them and they became much more effective. I think that is significant, too, in terms of what the trend seems to be in Iraq at

the present time in terms of embedding U.S. officers and men, the abler ones, in Iraqi military units. I think we're very late in doing this. We have been doing it for some time in Iraq, but not in sufficient numbers. Now we're proposing to increase those numbers from some four thousand, as I understand it, to some say fifteen thousand and some say twenty thousand. I think this is a very significant move in the right direction in Iraq based on our experience in Vietnam.

LC: It's a very interesting set of parallels to draw. I think you're probably right about the timing, too. One rather wishes it had been inaugurated on a larger scale maybe a couple of years ago.

JM: Well, as I think I told you in our last session, I wrote to Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense, in 2003, about looking to our Vietnam experience and draw from it the lessons that succeeded in connection with Iraq. I never got an answer from Wolfowitz. So I feel that I wanted to go this path much earlier and I think we should have. I hope it's just not too late to get started in it now from the standpoint of U.S. domestic politics. That's the concern now.

LC: Yes. I think you're right, Joe. I think you're right. Well, we can return to that one perhaps later on as well.

JM: Yes. Okay, Laura. I went into all this because we had raised it originally in the context of the trip I made to Vietnam as the acting assistant administrator for the Vietnam Bureau in February, I guess, of 1969. The session that I had with the USAID mission chief and all of his division chiefs in connection with the proposed program for the ensuing fiscal year, to prepare me for congressional testimony in support of our request for appropriations for Vietnam and the AID program for the next fiscal year. I arrived at this session with McDonald, the USAID mission director and his division chiefs. To my surprise I found Bill Colby there. Now, Colby certainly had an interest as the head of CORDS because quite a number of the USAID personnel were seconded to CORDS as was true of other U.S. agencies operating in Vietnam. A considerable amount of USAID appropriation for Vietnam was used in supporting CORDS activities. So there was an interest, but I had not anticipated that Colby, in view of not only his rank, but the fact that he was an extremely busy individual would not attend this session, but I would go call on him later. Colby and I had become friends while we were in Saigon together

earlier, but I still expected, in view of his rank and preoccupation with his job, that I would be calling on him and I was quite pleasantly surprised to find him at this programming session. He stayed throughout as a matter of fact. I've always taken my hat off to him for the generosity of spirit that he showed in attending that session and getting me properly briefed on the program in Vietnam to appear before congressional committees.

LC: It had been quite a long time since you had seen him then, Joe?

JM: Well, I don't think I had seen Colby for quite some time, several years probably because I was in Laos for three years you know, from '65 to '68. Colby left Washington probably in '67 to take up his first CORDS job in Vietnam. So I don't think I had seen him probably for quite a number of years at that point, although we had remained in contact with the family certainly through the two wives.

LC: Sure. Okay.

JM: I mention all this with respect to Colby partly because it stands in some contrast to the relationship that I seem to enjoy with Don McDonald, the director of the AID mission in Vietnam. I sort of detected a certain chill and aloofness on his part in dealing with me although he always maintained a very careful veneer of courtesy in dealing with him. I don't think that he felt very cordial in his relationship with me and I attribute it to a number of factors. One was as I've indicated we had quite a number of congressional visitors when I was director of the AID mission to Laos. I think I can say without appearing to be boasting that most of the congressional visitors left with a very favorable impression of the handling of the AID program in Laos and some even commented to me while they were in Laos that they thought lessons could be taken from the handling of the AID program in Laos in the administering of it in Vietnam. One of the ones who said that quite explicitly was Senator Ribacoff of Connecticut. I suspect some of this got back to McDonald and naturally in his position I don't think that pleased him too much to be compared somewhat unfavorably in the opinions at least of some members of the Congress with what job I was doing in Laos. Partly because I was not a career AID employee, I was a career Foreign Service officer on loan from the State Department to AID. I think that also contributed to this feeling. Also I became aware that McDonald was interested eventually in becoming an ambassador if certain senior

AID people were chosen as ambassadors as they were occasionally. So I think he felt that he was in a sense in competition with me for that eventual choice. So for those reasons I say I never felt that I enjoyed really warm relations with McDonald. Interestingly, Laura, in his—shall I go on with what happened subsequently?

LC: Indeed. Yes. Why not? Yes.

JM: He left Vietnam. He had been there I would say—let me think—I'm not quite sure how many years he had been there. He left—I guess he—I don't think he had been there too long as a matter of fact, but he left in the summer of '69 to become the assistant administrator for the Middle East in AID, the AID headquarters in Washington, which was a very senior assignment, a good assignment for him, but I think a few months later he found himself working under the man who had been his number two when he was mission director in Pakistan. I think that must have galled him a bit, too, because here his previous number two was now his boss. This particular fellow became the number two in the AID agency in Washington and therefore he was over McDonald. I suspect that rather rankled him also. In a nutshell, he never did become an ambassador prior to his retirement. I lost track of him later, but I know that he never held an ambassadorial position. I would wonder whether he was totally satisfied with the outcome of his career, but we'll leave it at that, Laura, unless you have some questions.

LC: No, that's okay. Go ahead, Joe.

JM: No, I have nothing more to say on him or on my visit to Vietnam in February of 1969. I'm ready to take myself back to Washington unless you have some—

LC: The only thing I would ask is your general perception of the situation as you found it during your visit, the perhaps morale?

JM: Laura, I think I indicated last time it was the situation in the provinces which we had to follow very closely to get a real sense of how things were going. I said that I visited one of the key provinces in central Vietnam, a coastal province, Binh Dinh, and found that the Vietnamese villagers, peasants, were beginning to return to their homes in the lowlands area. Now this didn't mean in the mountainous area that they were already doing so, but in the lowlands area it was clear that there was already some improvement in the situation from the terrible Tet attack about a year earlier and one or two subsequent communist offensives of lesser importance than the Tet one but still significant. It

appeared to me that there was some progress already being made by that time. I'll go into this a bit later in connection with my third and final visit to Vietnam from the Vietnam Bureau, which occurred in August, I think, where I found the situation substantially better than it appeared in February. Laura, I'm going to take myself back to Washington now. The next important thing that happened was that I, as the head of the Vietnam Bureau, like all the heads of geographic bureaus, appeared before Dr. Hannah, the number one, and Rud Poats, the number two in the AID agency to present and defend our proposed programs for the ensuing fiscal year. I think mine was probably the final one. I think all the other geographic heads had already appeared before Hannah and Poats. I think we also had some representation from outside agencies at these so-called budget presentations. I think we had a representative from the Bureau of the Budget, which I guess was by then called the Office of Budget and Management in the Executive Office of the President. I think there was a representative from that agency as well as probably from some of the others present at these sessions. My staff in the AID agency had put me through a rigorous dry run in preparation for this presentation and for preparation for the even more important presentations to committees of Congress later, which shows the significance in which this kind of thing was held and had to be held because one of the main functions, of course, of the bureaucracy in Washington was to obtain the appropriations so that the missions in the field could operate their programs with the money that was necessary.

LC: Sure.

JM: So this was I would say one of the two or three main functions of the AID bureaucracy in Washington. So the importance can't be downplayed at all. I spent a lot of effort, both in Washington and through this trip in Vietnam and in cooperation with my staff in the Vietnam Bureau in preparation for this presentation. I was gratified to find at the end of this presentation of several hours Rud Poats spoke up and said, "This has been the best presentation we've had from any of the bureaus in AID of the proposed programs for the next fiscal year."

LC: Wow.

JM: So that gave me a certain amount of pleasure that really an outsider in AID had been able to do this—and the outsider being myself since I was a Foreign Service

officer—had been able to come up with what Poats, who was a pretty rigorous individual—I always enjoyed good working relations with Rud Poats, but Rud was not a guy who came up with compliments easily. So I was quite pleased with this outcome. Then the next thing that I'll discuss, Laura, is the beginning of the congressional presentations unless again you have some questions.

LC: Joe, one thing that might be helpful to people to give them a fuller sense of the importance of this exercise within AID going to the administrator and talking to him about the shape of the program forthcoming—

JM: Yeah. It was a formal session because it was a big session with a lot of representation, but headed by Dr. Hannah and Rud Poats.

LC: Can you sort of just very briefly outline the sorts of things you would be presenting? Would you be presenting past successes and reasons for wanting to increase?

JM: Well, I would be presenting, Laura, our proposed AID request in terms of money for Vietnam and what the money was going to be used for in program terms within Vietnam and giving the reasons why we were proposing these different programs as well as defending the overall amount. I made a verbal presentation—I don't remember how long now, probably fairly substantial and then was subjected to questions from Hannah and Poats and I think others from other agencies since I would be subjected to questions later by committee members in Congress.

LC: Indeed.

JM: So in part, this was to show the heads of AID that we had a good program presentation and permit them to make any changes as the heads wanted to make in the program proposals and then to prepare me better for the congressional presentation.

LC: Just to remind people, the budget requests and so forth and the programmatic background to them that you would be putting forward would be in support of the operations for the Vietnam division only?

JM: Exactly, the operations in Vietnam. I'm talking about the spring of 1969. I think then the fiscal year of the U.S. government still began on July first. Later that was shifted to October first as is now the case, but I think it was still July first at that time. So we were approaching the presentation to the relevant committees of Congress itself and this exercise that I've just been describing was one of the preparatory steps for that.

LC: These would be, as I think you're about to say, essentially the preparatory kind of dry run for your congressional presentations?

JM: Partly that and as I say partly to permit the heads of the agency to direct that we make any changes they felt were necessary. I don't think any changes were made. After all, the program was in policy terms was pretty well set by that point since we'd been operating under war conditions in Vietnam for so many years. I suppose the more important part of it was to prepare me for the congressional presentation because it was not too likely that significant changes would be made within AID itself in the proposals that came out of the bureau.

LC: So your next step was to go to the Hill?

JM: Yep. That's right. Now I'll describe that if you'd like.

LC: Sure.

JM: The first committee before which I appeared was, let's see, it's called the House Foreign Affairs Committee. I hesitate because it's Foreign Relations in the Senate and Foreign Affairs in the House, which was chaired by a representative from Pennsylvania, Doc Morgan, M-O-R-G-A-N, a very congenial, easy-going individual who never gave AID much trouble in the presentation to his committee. He would permit the members of his committee to ask questions for five minutes only so that in a sense the whole thing was pretty routine. The only thing that I remember from the presentation to his committee was that a third-ranking member, a congressman from North Carolina, a Democratic congressman, both houses of Congress were then under Democratic control when we had a Republican president, Nixon. The third-ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, a man by the name of Falton from North Carolina, did at one point during the presentation of the budget proposals bring up the ouster of President Diem in the coup six years earlier and bemoan the fact that it was done. He thought the situation would be in much better shape in Vietnam if the U.S. had not supported the coup against Diem. I sprang to the defense of that. I had gone through that in great lengths in previous sessions with you. So I sprang to the defense so there was a bit of back and forth between Falton and myself on this issue, which was really a historical one rather than one with actuality in 1969 since Diem had been overthrown in October of 1963. So there was nothing really of great consequence in the presentation to the House

Foreign Affairs Committee. In contrast to—that was in June of '69—in contrast to my appearance about a month later before the appropriate sub-committee of the House Appropriations Committee. That was the Foreign [Operations] Sub-Committee of the House Appropriations Committee. That sub-committee had been chaired for well over a decade by Otto Passman, a Democrat of Louisiana, who had a reputation for trying to tear all the AID witnesses apart and subjecting them to a long, grueling sarcasm and so forth in contrast to Morgan's approach as the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. As a matter of fact, Passman opened the session on Vietnam by belittling the other committee. He always referred to it, that Foreign—he refers to it "that other committee," quote closed quote, which he derided because of the very cursory examination that it had given of the budgetary requests for the ensuing fiscal year. He certainly had no high regard whatsoever for that committee and his approach was utterly different as I've indicated. As it turned out, I will say this about Passman. He had headed that subcommittee for so long that often he knew more about the program than some of the AID people testifying before him because he'd had so much experience. Also interestingly, I'll describe his *modus operandi*. He did have a reason behind this withering attack to which he subjected the AID witnesses and the cuts he made in the budgetary requests—this approach was followed by him under both Democratic and Republican presidents. He hadn't really changed it because of Nixon's election. He really had a reason. He would subject the AID witnesses to this withering attack on his part, would cut back substantially the aid request and then he would defend it on the House floor and always use the arguments, "Well, I've gone through this program with a tooth-and-nail approach and in great detail. I know what I'm talking about so you can accept my recommendations as to what the appropriations should be." There was some justification to that because foreign aid is never a very popular thing to get congressmen to vote for, particularly in the House of Representatives. Passman was usually successful in getting the amount that he was defending on the floor through the House.

LC: That's very interesting tactics.

JM: There was some reason behind it. I'll have to give him credit, but it certainly didn't make the life of anybody from AID presenting the program easier. I testified for four hours, subject to constant questioning, and Passman had right beside him a member

of his staff who kept whispering questions in his ear which Passman would then vocalize and would go into even pickier details which even I who knew the program in very substantial detail couldn't give an answer. That is, "What if this one individual that you've listed here in the written program presentation for a certain project, what does he do?" Well, I would just have to answer that, "We'll submit the answer to that in writing for the record."

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: It was all one could do because we had a myriad of staff in Vietnam and I certainly didn't know what every particular individual was doing there.

LC: But this was a tactic, right?

JM: Oh, this was a tactic. I have never been so tired in my life as I was at the end of the four hours there. I'll describe the one slip I made, Laura, in my testimony.

LC: Okay.

JM: One of the things that Passman was focusing on was the AID request for money for the land reform program in Vietnam. Passman didn't particularly like this program. Some of his colleagues, of course, thought it was extremely important, but Passman didn't particularly like it. So he kept peppering me with questions on this and finally I let slip that some of the money would be used to pay the landlords for the land that was confiscated from them under the program. This Passman thought was a very damaging admission on my part. He jumped on that and sort of rammed it down my throat. Pretty soon then he drew that four-hour hearing to a close because he'd gotten the one point against me which he could use on the floor of the House of Representatives, but I was utterly washed out after those four hours. Now, Laura, I'm going to add a footnote about Passman, which I don't know whether you're aware of or not. Passman, who was a very senior Democratic congressman, as I indicated, had chaired this subcommittee for well over a decade. One of his chief interests was that of the Louisiana rice farmers. I think Louisiana is probably the biggest rice producer in the U.S.

LC: I think that's right.

JM: He always was pushing for more sales of U.S. rice within the confines of the AID program. He finally came a cropper on that very issue. Somehow several years later, sometime in the '70s I think, but I've forgotten how many years later, he got caught

up in an alleged bribery scandal with respect to the inclusion of rice in the program and his long political career came to an end over this issue.

LC: It had to do with AID?

JM: Hmm?

LC: With AID's purchases it had to do with?

JM: I suppose it was AID.

LC: Most likely.

JM: It could have been under the Public Law 480 program of the Department of Agriculture, which was—well, it was operated somewhat differently. I won't go into detail. I'm not sure under which program, but anyway, it brought Passman's career to an end. I don't know whether he failed to run for reelection or whether he was defeated for reelection. Anyway, it ended his career. Now, Laura, I'm going to also deal with one other member of that House Appropriations Sub-Committee, Don Riegle of Michigan. I don't know whether any of these names mean anything to you. They probably don't.

LC: Actually, Don Riegle does mean rather a lot to me. You know that I'm from Michigan and I know that he represented the Flint area. He was sort of an up-and-comer, actually.

JM: Yeah. Well, let me describe my experiences with Riegle. Riegle was first elected, I think, to the House of Representatives as a Republican in 1966. He decided that he—he was a very ambitious individual and he was one of the first members of Congress to take advantage of the new computer system to mechanize the whole approach to politics, which could provide much more information, of course, and be much more effective in terms of getting elected. So he was really an innovator in that field, but he decided that the best way for him to achieve publicity—I almost said notoriety—publicity immediately as a freshman congressman was to begin to attack what was happening in Vietnam because it was already beginning to become a contentious issue within the U.S. So he constantly peppered AID with criticisms and letters and demands for information about the AID program right at the outset as a congressman. He had been reelected in '68 as a Republican, was a member of the Passman sub-committee. Passman, of course, after his long grilling of the AID people would finally go around to the members of his committee to give them a chance to question and when he came to

Riegle he addressed Riegle, “Mr. President, it’s now your turn.”

LC: Oh, gosh.

JM: He knew that Riegle had unbounded ambition and he even thought he could become president some day, but Passman didn’t reserve his sarcasm just for me. He used it also on them, members of his sub-committee, and of course I was rather amused by that because of the problems we’d had with Riegle. As a matter of fact, I think Rud Poats and I had spent hours in Riegle’s office at various points defending various AID operations. So I was very glad to see the sarcasm Passman was using toward Riegle. Now, to proceed with Riegle, by the beginning of ’69, of course, we had a Republican president. Not too long thereafter Riegle decided that he could get more publicity and move himself ahead faster, I guess, in Michigan by becoming a Democrat. So he switched parties when he was still in the House. Then in 1976 he ran for the Senate as a Democrat from Michigan. The seat had become vacant, I think, through a death. Riegle ran for the Senate and was elected and had three terms as a Democratic senator. He also came a cropper—I’m sure you know this, Laura—just as Passman did over a scandal related to Charles Keating, who I think was a savings and loan operator in Arizona, and not a very ethical one, who sought congressional support among a lot of leading people whose careers were affected by the scandal in which he became involved in, well, I guess it was the early ’90s. There were five senators who were implicated in one way or another with Keating’s activities, who had defended in the halls of Congress what he was doing. This was before they became well aware that he was really a crook. Shall I mention the five senators?

LC: Please do.

JM: One was John McCain, who has for many years now appeared as one of the leading proponents of campaign finance reform. It’s clear to me that this is McCain’s motivation, this early involvement, innocent involvement on his part, in the Keating affair which taught him that you’ve got to be mighty careful. I think has completely motivated as a sort of self-defense mechanism what he’s done in the campaign finance reform area. Whether you were aware of that, Laura, or not—

LC: I was not actually, no.

JM: Then a second senator from Arizona—McCain of course is a Republican—

the second senator from Arizona, DeConcini, who had been also, I think, originally elected in 1976 had become a rather senior senator because of his involvement decided not to run for reelection in 1994 when his seat came up again. A very senior senator from California, Cranston, was also involved. He also elected not to run for reelection because of his involvement. A fourth senator was Senator Glenn of Ohio, the astronaut, who was not very deeply involved. He remained in the Senate and I think he was subsequently reelected. I think he finally decided to stand down in 1998 and I think that had nothing to do with the Keating affair. The fifth, of course, was Riegle. How this man from Michigan got involved—and because of his involvement Riegle also decided despite his unbounded ambition not to run for reelection in 1994. That Keating scandal brought three senatorial careers to an end including Riegle's. Of course, ended any idea of presidential, the presidency on his part. So all that is rather interesting, I think.

LC: Oh, it is. Yeah.

JM: The way it has developed. Maybe I've gone into much detail.

LC: No. Not at all. Not at all. No such thing. Now how did you handle Riegle in your testimony? Did he—

JM: He didn't question [me] very long. So it didn't really matter much. It was sort of anti-climactic, his kind of questioning, after what I had been through with Passman. That passed through without any great difficulty. So that was my experience with the House Appropriations Sub-Committee.

LC: May I just ask whether you came across the fellow who was at one time or another the chairman of that committee?

JM: I'm going to get into that, Laura.

LC: Okay. Very good.

JM: I'm going to get into that, if not today then next time.

LC: Okay. Super.

JM: I want to continue with the budget presentation before I do.

LC: Please do.

JM: Because I know whom you're talking about and my relationship with him was not very substantive and was very pleasant.

LC: Okay. Good.

JM: That was in July of ’69, my experience with the Passman committee. My next experience was very late in the year, probably October or November in the Senate. Now the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which normally had hearings with respect to the AID budget presentation decided that year not to engage in any at all, but the Senate Appropriations Committee, actually a sub-committee of that committee, that committee usually had no hearings but that year decided to hold a hearing. The relevant sub-committee of the appropriations committee was chaired by Gale McGee, a Democrat from Wyoming, a man whom I had come to know fairly well, whom I had liked very much, who was very sympathetic, very supportive of our policies in Vietnam and very sympathetic to the AID requests for appropriations. I didn’t anticipate any difficulty with him during the sub-committee hearing, but I had been forewarned that Senator Ellender of Louisiana, who was the chairman of the Senate appropriations committee and who would not normally attend, I don’t believe, that sub-committee hearing was going to be there and was going to subject me to strong attack about a purchase of a rice shipment by the Vietnamese government from Thailand rather than from the U.S. Louisiana farmers for this particular rice shipment and that I should be well prepared to answer that because Ellender was going to be, what do we say, “out for bear” I think is the expression. So I was prepared and Ellender did subject me to very hostile questioning. I defended this rice purchase on this ground that the Vietnamese government suddenly found in— this was in October or November—suddenly found in October that it was running short of rice before the new rice crop came in. Somehow they hadn’t gauged the domestic market properly and suddenly realized they would need more rice before their own crop came in. Since they needed it so urgently and since rice was a staple in the Vietnamese diet and if there weren’t sufficient rice you might even have riots in the streets, which was certainly not something wanted by anybody on our side during the war. But they needed to get that rice as quickly as possible. So they turned to Thailand, which is next door, to get the rice so they could get it quickly. I made this presentation to Ellender at the subcommittee hearing and it didn’t cut any ice with him whatsoever. He kept attacking me on this score. Finally I remembered that I had met Ellender earlier. Well, I’d had two experiences with Ellender. One was long before in Switzerland in 1954, I think. You see how these things go over?

LC: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

JM: At that time Ellender—Ellender was always pretty much a lone operator. I think even as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, which nobody achieves until the end of a very long senatorial career, as I know you're aware of.

LC: Yes.

JM: I don't think even as chairman that Ellender had a great deal of influence. He never had a great deal of influence on that committee. But for years in the '50s and I guess continuing into the '60s Ellender would every year make a long trip alone abroad in connection with the State Department appropriation, going in to every single individual employed in a U.S. embassy. He arrived in Switzerland in '54 on this mission. I remember our ambassador, Frances Willis, a lady, summoned all of us into the embassy on a Sunday to meet with Senator Ellender and defend our staffing levels. It was such a picayune approach which Ellender employed in this annual trip he made. Again, we had been forewarned about this and were prepared to deal with him. The one inane thing that I remember that came out of this session with Ellender, at one point Ellender said, "Some people are defending the aid appropriation for Italy because they're afraid the country may go communist." He said, "I say to them, 'Let them go communist and see how they like it.'"

LC: Great. (Laughs)

JM: That's exactly what he said. So I remember that experience with Ellender when I had to deal with him fifteen years later. I had again met Ellender before my testimony before that subcommittee at a dinner at the Vietnamese embassy. He was present there. I had a conversation with him, a very, very pleasant conversation socially. During this subcommittee hearing Ellender said, "What I am doing is defending the American farmer by insisting that Vietnam should purchase this rice from the U.S. and not from Thailand." So I thought I could elicit some sympathy from Ellender by saying, "Oh, I was born on a farm myself and nobody is more interested in defending the farmers than I am." Well, that didn't cut any ice whatsoever with Ellender. He continued his very strong attack on me. I'll give you a little footnote to this, Laura. He was so offensive in the way he was dealing—well, let me give you the outcome of this substance before I deal with this aspect of it. Bill Sullivan, who was the main man in the State

Department dealing with Vietnam, was also at this hearing and he defused the whole situation between Ellender and me by saying, “The Vietnamese ambassador, Bui Diem, is leaving tonight to go back to Saigon on consultation. I’ll telephone him and tell him to take this up with President Thieu.” That satisfied Ellender and I now see why. What these congressmen really want is something they can indicate that some action is being taken because of their intervention.

LC: Right, “Because I did something it led to this,” whether that was effective or not.

JM: Whether it achieves anything or not, but it shows that some action was taken because of my intervention.

LC: “See how important I am.”

JM: “I still should have your vote.” That defused the substantive issue, but since this hearing was public, Nonie and the two younger of my kids were up in the gallery listening to it. When I was being subjected so heavily to Ellender’s unpleasantness, my middle daughter Priscilla jumped up and said out loud, “Nobody can treat my father like this.” Unfortunately Ellender didn’t hear it or maybe fortunately. Nonie had to take her out and calm her down.

LC: Oh, poor thing. She was traumatized.

JM: This was one thing I’ve always held in the favor of my middle daughter, how she defended her papa like this.

LC: There you go.

JM: Well, Laura, I think maybe we’re coming to the end of our time and maybe I’ll—since this was the last hearing on the AID appropriations for that year that concludes my substantive dealings with the members of Congress on the budget request. We can continue this the next time if you would like.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [53] of [57]
Date: January 26, 2007

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I have the privilege of continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the twenty-sixth of January 2007. I am in Lubbock. As usual the ambassador is speaking with me by phone from his home in Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, if you would, I think I'd like to pick up the narrative where we left off, which was with developments at the Senate Appropriations Committee.

JM: Right, Laura. I am going to put on the record here that I'm recovering from a cold. So if I don't sound quite as well on this tape or quite as lucid or intelligent, I beg some forgiveness.

LC: A little leeway. Okay

JM: Right.

LC: Okay. I think you're granted.

JM: The next contact with a congressman which I want to describe is with Senator Packwood, Republican of Oregon, who was elected first in 1968. This contact happened in early 1969 when he was a freshman senator who was very interested in land reform in Vietnam. He summoned Dr. Hannah, the head of the AID agency in Washington, and myself to his office to discuss the matter. When we arrived we found that he was accompanied by a professor from the University of Washington who had made a fetish of land reform in Vietnam, declaring that this was the single thing that would bring us victory in Vietnam if we engaged in land reform. Though it was certainly an important issue, I don't think it could at all have been decisive in the outcome of the war. Anyway, clearly Packwood was on the side of this hostile professor from Washington. So we faced considerable antagonism as we dealt with the problem. I did most of the talking, pointing out that AID and indeed the U.S. government had recently as a policy matter not only endorsed, but decided to push the land reform program as one of its principal priorities in Vietnam. I did state that I did not think that the land should be given to the peasants because of my experience in Laos where I found that if the AID

program bore all the expense of constructing, for example, a school in a village it was considered by the villagers as an American project. If the communists came in they weren't as likely to defend it as if they had made a substantial contribution through their own labor to the project themselves. I transposed that to this issue of having the peasants pay something for the land they were getting. This professor, however, convinced Packwood that it should be given to the peasants outright on a grant basis. It ended that way, that session in the senator's office. Some months later the chief agricultural credit official of the South Vietnamese government came to Washington on a visit. This was also an important issue for agricultural production and for assistance to the peasants. I decided to give a luncheon for him on the eighth floor of the State Department and I invited Senator Packwood to join us, which he did. Well, to my dismay it turned out that this agricultural credit official was lukewarm at best about the idea of land reform. So this attempt on my part to show Packwood that my heart was in the right place as far as the peasants were concerned actually backfired. He thought I had brought this guy aboard to try to convince him that we were all in favor of land reform. As it turned out this official was not very enthusiastic about it at all. So the best efforts sometimes go awry as Robert Burns said in his famous poem in somewhat different Scottish brogue, I think. Anyway, the epilogue to this business was again several months later. I think it was only a couple of months before I left the Vietnam Bureau and AID. A copy of the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, a daily Hurst newspaper in Seattle, was placed in my desk and here I was the lead front-page story about my opposition to land reform in Vietnam. This professor at the University of Washington had obviously gotten the newspaper to publish this attack on me. I wrote a letter outlining in detail my views on this and the *Post Intelligencer* did have the grace to publish in full on the front page, which was unusual, but they published right along side of it the professor's rebuttal and attack on me. This convinced me that you can't really win after all a bureaucrat or even a politician in a spat with the press. The press always manages to get the last word in.

LC: Right.

JM: Then a further epilogue to this land reform issue was that I think within a month President Thieu of South Vietnam made a policy statement himself on land reform, stating that land would be given outright to the peasants without any

reimbursement on their part, but the landlords would be paid by the government. So in effect, the professor's views prevailed in Vietnam, but this did close the issue and of course since Thieu had made the decision I accepted it with good grace. So that was the story of my encounter with Senator Packwood who went on as you know to serve—he was reelected in 1992 for a fifth term and then ran afoul of the Senate and the public because of alleged harassment of women and resigned his seat in 1995. That was about twenty-seven years later. Interesting to see what happens to politicians eventually.

LC: Yes, very much so, Joe.

JM: Laura, I'll just wind up this matter of my dealings with members of Congress by discussing very briefly a few other contacts which were of a pleasant nature, as some of these as I have discussed were not very pleasant at all. But you asked me at one point whether I had ever had any contact with Congressman Mahan, M-A-H-A-N, (Editor's note: George Mahon) and I think it was pronounced Mahan. Not Mahan but Mahan, I think, who was the congressman from the Texas Tech University district. He had been elected first in 1934 and had for quite a number of years in the late '60s, the chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee. I ran into him and his very Texan-Southern wife at a dinner party given by the South Vietnamese ambassador in Washington, Bui Diem, and fell into conversation with the congressman after dinner at some length and found him a very pleasant individual. Indeed, I didn't have any direct business with him, but that contact was very fine indeed. I think he probably is remembered in your district with considerable respect and affection. I don't know whether you ever hear anybody talking about him now or not.

LC: In fact there's a biography being written on him just now.

JM: Oh, really?

LC: He has something like five hundred boxes of his papers. As you know, he served in Congress for thirty-five years or something on that order. All of those papers are here at Texas Tech.

JM: Oh, they are?

LC: Yes. A biography is being written. So yes, and his family is still here in town and owns a thriving business under his name of cleaning stores I think, cleaners.

JM: I see. Mm-hmm.

LC: So yes. I think affection is the right term.

JM: Yeah. Well, I certainly remember him with a very pleasant recollection of my brief social contact with him.

LC: Very good.

JM: Another contact with a congressman which I would like to mention, in 1969 Tran Quoc Buu, who was the head of the South Vietnamese Labor Confederation, came to Washington on a visit. He was quite close to George Meany, who was the president of the AFL-CIO and came to visit Meany among others. Meany had been supporting him over the years both politically and I think ALF-CIO and came to visit. Among others Meany had been supporting him over the years both politically and I think for the ALF-CIO had made some financial contribution to his labor confederation. Anyway, he was considered an influential individual in South Vietnam, came to Washington, and I arranged a luncheon again on the eighth floor of the State Department for him and invited several members of the House of Representatives. Among the ones I remember who came were Congressman Moorehead, a Democrat from the Pittsburgh area in Pennsylvania, I think, who was a liberal congressman and very close to labor unions and also very interested in Vietnam and supporting our Vietnam policy. He came and I had very good talks with him and enjoyed very good relations with him and also Congressman Robert Taft, Republican of Ohio, who the following year was elected to the Senate, also came. That luncheon went off very well indeed with the congressmen and with Mr. Buu. I also will mention that while Buu was in the States we also gave a dinner for him at our house in Virginia, the Virginia suburbs of Washington. My wife had worked closely with Buu during the last year we served in Vietnam, ’61 and ’62, that last year with assistance in the poorer districts of Saigon. So she had gotten to know Buu quite well and we decided to have him out to the house for dinner. We arranged for us without any servants or assistance we had a rather substantial dinner party. We had among others the then current South Vietnamese ambassador, Bui Diem and his wife. We had the previous South Vietnamese ambassador, Tran Van Chuong and his wife. We had Ambassador Bill Sullivan and his wife. He had been ambassador in Laos and was by that time assigned to the State Department in Washington. So we had quite a dinner party for our little house in Washington. I think it was one of the last major functions we

had in that house, the other one being the wedding of our oldest daughter some months later in the garden of the house. We left the house to go abroad at the end of ’69 and then sold that house in the beginning of ’73. So this was one of the last social functions that we had in that house. We have a very good memory of it.

LC: Yes. It sounds like it.

JM: That’s personal, but I thought I would interject that here.

LC: That’s very nice. That’s very nice. Go ahead, Joe.

JM: Well, next, Laura, I would like to talk about—let me look at my notes here and see where I am. Yes, I mentioned George Meany, the president of the AFL-CIO. Now, today’s public may not realize what significance and prestige Meany enjoyed in the United States, far more than the, current president of the AFL-CIO does. He was considered one of the principal figures in the [country]. Interestingly when I came into the Vietnam Bureau of AID in August of ’68, I found that once a month or every six weeks various State Department and AID officials trooped over to the AFL-CIO headquarters on 16th Street in Washington—it was quite an ornate building—to brief Meany and other high officials of his organization on policy matters concerning the United States. So this practice had been inaugurated under Lyndon Johnson as president. Nixon continued it when he became president.

LC: That’s interesting.

JM: I was often a member of this group, certainly in ’69 I was usually a member of the group that went over because Meany was very supportive of our Vietnam policy. Therefore we exerted maximum efforts to cultivate him and his officials in the AFL-CIO. This was to me an interesting way in which the government worked with the public, particularly with the labor unions at that point who were quite supportive of the U.S. foreign policy.

LC: These briefings would be general and not only about Vietnam or Southeast Asia?

JM: Officials from other bureaus would also join in. So it was wide ranging and usually lasted, I think, each briefing I would say for an hour or so.

LC: Fascinating. How large might a group be going over there, Joe?

JM: Well, if we had officials from most of the geographic bureaus of the State

Department and the corresponding bureaus in AID, I suppose we would be at eight or ten or more.

LC: My goodness. That's quite an investment of time.

JM: It is, but it was a very good example of close cooperation between government and a non-governmental organization.

LC: Also as you say demonstrates the high regard in which not only Meany but the AFL-CIO generally was held.

JM: Yeah. I think, Laura, some long time ago in our interviews here, I probably mentioned when I was a student at the National War College in 1962 and '63 for ten months George Meany came and addressed our group at the National War College one afternoon. I can remember seeing him sit up there without a note with his cane talking and talking in a very articulate fashion to the group for about fifty minutes.

LC: No kidding. Not a note in his hand.

JM: Right. He was quite an impressive figure I must say. Then, Laura, I would also like to bring up next a session in President Nixon's office, the only time I ever met Nixon. I'll give you the background for this. I don't know whether you have heard of the name of David Lilienthal, I imagine you have.

LC: Yes, sir.

JM: Who was the head of the Tennessee Valley Authority, a big public power project that was launched in the 1930s and was considered a great success in government operations in the business sector. Lilienthal was head of that organization for a long time and was highly regarded in the United States as one of the leading liberals in the country. When I came into the Vietnam Bureau, Lilienthal had gotten a contract. He was no longer then the head of TVA, the Tennessee Valley Authority. He resigned that after many years in that position. AID had negotiated a contract with him to prepare an economic report on South Vietnam, which we hoped would be useful to the AID agency in devising and carrying out the AID program. By 1969 that report was ready. Dr. Hannah, your former president, ex-president of your alma mater, Michigan State, who as I've indicated was then the head of the AID agency in Washington and who had very good political antennae, as I guess a lot of university presidents have to have, decided that this report ought to be presented by Lilienthal to President Nixon, that there could be

mutual interests there. Nixon was very interested in retaining whatever liberal support for our Vietnam policy he could. Lilienthal was one who supported him and Lilienthal was also hoping for a further contract with AID so there was a mutual Nixon-Lilienthal interest in this meeting. Now I will say at this point that the Lilienthal report, though politically useful, was not very good.

LC: Is that right?

JM: In economics, yes. It was very generalized, maybe by design, partly because he wanted an additional contract to flush it out, but also because as a number of people in my Vietnam Bureau pointed out to me the people who were employed on the Lilienthal contract were not particularly impressive in their field, but politics sometimes, as you know, overcome other judgments. In this case Hannah and I accompanied Lilienthal to President Nixon's office. I had prepared talking points for Nixon before the meeting, but there wasn't much of substance to talk about. It was a good generalized political talk, nice in my recollection as the only time I ever actually personally met Nixon and all went off very well. The next day there was a big press story about Lilienthal's call on President Nixon on Vietnam in his office, which was what Nixon wanted. Then Lilienthal got his second contract with AID. So it all worked out beautifully.

LC: All went home happy, huh?

JM: Exactly, another interesting example of the way our government operates.

LC: Yes.

JM: I've just mentioned Dr. Hannah in this connection. I'm also going to bring him in to the next thing I want to raise. At some point in '69 Dr. Hannah suggested to me that he thought it would be a good idea if we negotiated a contract to investigate what the prospective economic aid needs of Vietnam would be over the next five years, what developments and what aid might be required and what it could be used for. That impressed me as a very good suggestion. Then I began to think about who could do this job. I've already mentioned the fact that Lilienthal, a noted figure, hadn't produced a very good report. I'm going to also interject at this point that AID also had a contract with the Hudson Institute. A big fat guy was the head of it. I can't think of his name at the moment and he was well known publicly in the United States, too. This contract also had been negotiated before I came to the Vietnam Bureau. Anyway, Hudson came up

with the unique but absolutely outlandish idea that the one thing that should be done during the war in Vietnam was to dig a canal all the way across the Mekong Delta area. I never quite understood why. I think he thought the communists would be kept on one side and the [U.S.-South Vietnamese] government forces on the other, but this was the result of one AID contract. Hudson was a very prestigious organization and normally this guy who headed it was very highly regarded, but again the product was absolutely useless as you can see. So having had these two experiences with well-known public figures under contract to AID with respect to Vietnam I decided maybe we better look for something with more substance. So I came up with the idea that Leland Barrows might be a very good man to head this group to make this special study for us. Barrows had been the head of the AID mission in Vietnam from 1954 to 1958. He then became an assistant administrator of the AID agency, head of a geographic bureau, and then subsequently served for about five years as ambassador to Cameroon in the earlier 1960s. By this time he was in the private sector employed by a think tank and therefore could pretty easily become available for this. I contacted him to see whether he was interested. I told him this was exploratory. He indicated that he would be interested. I also knew that during Barrow's [time] as head of the AID mission in Vietnam, Michigan State University had two contracts with AID—one in the public administration field and the other in development of the Vietnamese police, both related to Vietnam, and that relations between Barrows and the Michigan State University officials in Vietnam had often been pretty stormy indeed. I assume that Dr. Hannah who was at that time the president of Michigan State had always been fed the views of his own personnel in Vietnam on these conflicts. So I realized that Hannah might not be too favorable when I mentioned Barrow's name. When I suggested Barrow's name to head this, I could feel a distinct coolness on Dr. Hannah's part. He didn't express any outright opposition, but I outlined the reasons that I thought Barrows would be able to produce a very useful report and Hannah acceded these views. We did contract with Barrows for this job. That was also an interesting interplay between Hannah and myself over Barrows. Hannah did overcome whatever prejudices had been built up by his personnel in Vietnam against Barrows and acceded to my recommendation. Anyway, when Barrows came in to finalize the contract he said, "Now, do you want me to produce the current fashion in this

kind of study, that is a long mathematical analysis of the various aspects of the economy of Vietnam?" I had known Lee off and on over the years. I said, "No, Lee." I said, "You can put that into an appendix if you want, but what I want is something that's relatively easy to read. I don't want to have to spend days and weeks trying to decipher mathematical tables and analyzing the Vietnamese economy on what should be done." Indeed, that is the kind of report he produced. He did come up with a very good one, as a matter of fact. I might interject at this point, Laura, one thing that I think will interest you. I think the chief Michigan State official in Vietnam was Wesley Fishel, whose name you have probably run into in your Vietnam studies.

LC: Indeed. Yes, uh-huh. Fishel was in Vietnam for quite a number of years and became very close to President Ngo Dinh Diem, and who considered himself one of the principal outside advisors to Diem. That also, of course, influenced his conflicts with Barrows over this because Fishel didn't consider himself particularly responsive to Barrows as the head of the AID mission since he was so close to Diem. I think I indicated to you much earlier I came to know Fishel quite well during my service in Vietnam. As political counselor generally enjoyed good relations with him. I think Fishel eventually became rather disillusioned with Diem as the years went by and therefore shifted his position considerably. Anyway, Fishel spent quite a number of years there, but I'm sure Fishel had been quite influential in determining Dr. Hannah's prior views with respect to Barrows. That was another interesting interplay of various forces, historical and current.

LC: Joe, can I ask when did you first meet Leland Barrows?

JM: When I went to Vietnam in 1957 on a visit. That was the first time I met him. I knew of him before that because interestingly in the late 1940s and early '50s Lee Barrows had been the boss for my wife Nonie's brother in Paris in the Marshall Plan European headquarters there.

LC: Oh, no kidding?

JM: Yeah. So I had known of him through Nonie's brother Bill, but I don't think I had met him previously. I might possibly have met him at that time. I'm not sure. When I was the Marshall Plan man in Iceland I used to go down to Paris quite often. I may have met Lee Barrows briefly at that time and probably did, but my first extensive

contact was when I went to Vietnam in 1957. I might mention that Barrows was a very able official, but he was a very sensitive and prickly individual himself. So he could be difficult to get along with. But I had generally a very high regard for him.

LC: In general did you think that his ideas that emerged in this report in 1969 or 1970 were of a piece with what he was trying to do in the mid-1950s? Did you see a continuity there?

JM: Well, the situation had altered considerably then, Laura, so I can't say that there was that much relationship to what he produced in '69. What he was doing in the late '50s I think was generally quite correct when he was director of the mission. What he recommended at the end of 1969 for the future economy of Vietnam, whether as I've indicated because of the many changes in that country in the intervening years, had been considerably different—

LC: Was he—

JM: But what—

LC: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

JM: But what he did recommend looked very good to us.

LC: Was he interested in using the same kinds of tools? In other words, for example, not unrestricted aid, but rather aid with certain contingencies attached, those kinds of general tools for—

JM: Laura, I can't remember the details, but I'm sure he would have. I don't think he was ever really in favor of unrestricted aid to any foreign government. I think we should certainly feel in every case that we have a right to express some views as to how it should be used.

LC: Indeed. Yes, if we're paying for it, yes. Joe, let's take a break there.

JM: Okay. Now, the next episode I would like to discuss was also to me a fascinating one both at the time and in retrospect. In 1969, AID had negotiated a contract with Southern Illinois University to establish a Vietnam department at the university, a Vietnam department to engage in Vietnam studies. We were to provide a certain amount of money in support of this program. Well, I think this decision came from the senator, Sen. Everett Dirksen. I'm sure you've heard of Dirksen who was then minority leader of the Senate.

LC: Yes.

JM: He decided that the contract should be signed in his office, again a good politician obviously.

LC: Sure.

JM: So Dr. Hannah and I trekked up to his office and we found there not only the president of Southern Illinois University, of course, and Senator Dirksen, but the junior senator, Senator Percy, who later became chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Congressman Melvin Price of East St. Louis, who subsequently became chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and various other officials. So it was a fairly high-powered session. Dirksen absolutely dominated. Dirksen was one of a kind. He had a huge head, a deep baritone voice talking in mellifluous fashion, often quoting Shakespeare as he talked, a completely dominant personality and also a very heavy consumer of liquor.

LC: Yes. I think that's—I've read that, so yes.

JM: His florid complexion reflected it, but he was quite jovial in his treatment of people, an excellent politician. He was the kind of outsized personality which I don't think you find in the Senate any longer. You used to find them in the earlier years, quite a number of them, but in that respect politics have changed in the U.S. I don't think we have that kind of personality any longer.

LC: I would agree. I would agree.

JM: He would certainly dominate any session in which he participated. I enjoyed that meeting in his office, that signing of the contract with Southern Illinois University, very much indeed and look back on it with great pleasure. Unfortunately, within about six months I think Dirksen died, maybe not surprising in view of his rate of consumption of liquor.

LC: Right. He lived large I think.

JM: Exactly. That's a good way of expressing it, very good. Now, I also will mention just in passing that while I was the head of the Vietnam Bureau in the year 1969 I had a telephone call from Gerald Ford, whom I know that you're quite aware of. At that time Gerald Ford was the minority leader in the House of Representatives. He called me one day. I cannot recollect what the subject was, but at that time we were getting rid of a

lot of people in the Vietnam Bureau and I suspect it concerned one of his constituents more than likely, but I can't swear to that at all. But I know it was a very pleasant session over the telephone with him. That's the only contact I ever had in my life with Gerald Ford, who as you know, subsequently became the only non-elected vice president and president of the United States as has been pointed out in connection with his recent death.

LC: The only Michigander who ever occupied either of those two offices, elected or not.

JM: Is that true? I hadn't thought of that. That's true, too.

LC: Yes. Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: He, of course, came from Grand Rapids, which is where you originated, I believe.

LC: Yes. I've got family there, that's for sure.

JM: Right. Where my oldest daughter and her husband have lived all their adult lives in pursuit of their careers there. So you and I both have real attachments to Gerald Ford's hometown where there is an excellent Gerald Ford museum, as you know.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: I haven't seen it for quite a number of years, but I did see it two or three decades ago now and I was quite impressed with it.

LC: Did you come away with a sense of Gerry Ford as kind of an easygoing fellow?

JM: Absolutely, because unlike a number of congressmen who could become quite bullying in connections with their constituents' problems he was not at all. If that was what he raised—I have no recollection of an unpleasant experience at all with him over the telephone, on the contrary.

LC: Joe, were you likely to get calls from Congress members?

JM: Oh, from time to time, yes. More often letters, of course, because usually a congressman wouldn't invest the time in a telephone call. Some member of the staff would write the letter and the congressman would sign it on behalf of the constituent. I learned eventually what a congressman wants to be able to show in many cases is that he's tried to do something even if it's not successful, that he's tried to protect his constituents' interests. Of course, some are so convinced they'll push it much harder, but

this is the normal reason a congressman would make a contact with somebody in the executive branch, to show that he's tried to do something on behalf of his constituents' interests even if not successful.

LC: Sure. Go ahead, Joe, if you had an additional—

JM: Laura, next—that I think winds up my dealing with prominent members of Congress and very high officials of the executive branch. Another function which occupied a good deal of my time as head of the Vietnam Bureau was selecting personnel for the AID mission in Vietnam and for CORDS. I've explained what CORDS is, the pacification program. I, of course, dealt primarily with trying to find replacements for senior officials. I'll discuss a few of these in this talk with you.

LC: Sure.

JM: Don McDonald, the head of the AID mission in Vietnam, decided to come out in 1969. There was no difficulty in selecting a replacement from him because he had his deputy, a fellow—I think his name was Bozer as I recall [name not correct]—who had been AID mission director in Indonesia, had served as deputy for some time in Vietnam and had favorably impressed everybody both in the embassy in Vietnam and in Washington. So there was no difficulty in naming him immediately as Don McDonald's successor in Vietnam. Another replacement in the mission in Vietnam was the head of what was called the Commercial Import Program, which doesn't mean a thing, of course, to anybody outside AID. What it was, this was our balance of payments assistance to Vietnam, financing imports to help balance the foreign payments of the country and to try to keep the inflation under control. This was a major part of the total AID budget and obviously important in political, economic, and social senses.

LC: Yes.

JM: We had to replace the head of it in Vietnam and what we did there was take one of my four subdivision heads in the bureau at Washington. Again we had a head of what we called the Commercial Import Program. We just set him out to take over the same job in Vietnam. Interestingly he had been an AID mission director at one time but he was quite a different personality from the fellow succeeded Don McDonald. He was very authoritative, rather difficult for his subordinates to get along with, not for his seniors, but subordinates. For that reason, I think, never had any prospect of a second job

as an AID mission director and had accepted this somewhat subordinate job in the bureau on Washington and accepted with alacrity the assignment to the mission in Vietnam, which was at least a couple of rungs down from an AID mission director. So, that one was not difficult to fill, either. The other two I want to mention were quite troublesome. The two were the chief program officer in the AID mission—that's a very important job in an AID mission because he's the one who draws up the future programs for approval by the AID mission director and also has responsibilities for general supervision below the AID mission director's level of the implementation of programs that have been approved. So that's a significant job. The other vacancy which arose in '69 was that of economic counselor in the embassy and in Vietnam that was an extremely important job, highly regarded by Ambassador Bunker because one of the big issues in Vietnam in '69 was the question of exchange rate. Should the Vietnamese piaster be devaluated and if so how much and how to bring about the South Vietnamese government's adoption of a devaluation? Now this required a not only an excellent economist, but a very high-powered figure. I'm going to deal first with the program officer and then with the replacement of the economic counselor.

LC: Very good.

JM: The program officer, the then current one, was Lloyd Jonnes, J-O-N-N-E-S. Now, Jonnes was an individual who I had come to know very well in Switzerland fifteen years earlier in the earlier 1950s. He and I had become very close friends. He was shifted from Switzerland to Austria. When Nonie and I made our first visit to Vienna in 1953, I'll be very candid and say Doc Jonnes and I got drunk together in Vienna to the utter disgust of our two wives.

LC: I'll bet. (Laughs)

JM: Anyway, we were very good friends and we remained friends over the years. I stress this because Jonnes, who had been in Vietnam only a few months decided he wanted out because he completely disagreed with our war policy in Vietnam. Therefore I had to look for a replacement. Interestingly, Laura, our friendship broke up completely over this question of Vietnam War policy, another instance of where old friendships were sacrificed to policy differences within the government in a number of cases. I mentioned the one between Ambassador Nolting in Vietnam and the man who was chosen as his

number two, Bill Trueheart. That's another big example of this, but there were several instances of this in the government where old friendships were sacrificed because of strong policy feelings on the part of the individuals. Anyway, I had some trouble finding a replacement for Jonnes. One thing, I had certain individuals I wanted to get proved to be of Jonnes's persuasion on the war policy. What I think was probably the mission director, I think, to Morocco, but I'm not sure. Anyway he also bowed out very quickly and another one was a man whose name you may know Princeton Lyman. Lyman subsequently became head assistant administrator in the AID agency, I think ambassador to Nigeria and, I think, he may have even been assistant secretary for International Organizations in the State Department under Clinton. Anyway, he rose quite high in the government, but he was bitterly opposed to our war policy in Vietnam and absolutely refused to go when I approached him. I had that problem of trying to find capable people who were supportive of our policy in Vietnam. Then once I found them getting them released by the bureau which employed them. Now, President Johnson had made clear that Vietnam should have an absolute priority as far as personnel was concerned. Nixon had not reiterated that, but I think would probably have been generally supportive. But invoking high authority can alienate colleagues very much as you know.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: So I generally tried to talk the heads of the other bureaus in AID into releasing the officials rather than standing there invoking higher authority. So that also took a considerable amount of time. I wondered whether the fact that I tried to raid the better members of their staff from time to time would alienate them from me. I did find at the end of my service in the AID bureau that my fears on that ground had no basis. I'll discuss that a little later when I come to the end of my tour there. Anyway, I had to invest a good deal of time in this choice of personnel. The other one I mentioned was economic counselor of the embassy. I reviewed a large number of files of Foreign Service officers, particularly those who had had, of course, abundant economic experience and had great difficulty, I'm very candid to say, to find anybody in the Foreign Service who I thought could qualify for this job of economic counselor in the embassy in Saigon. Because in most cases, embassy officials, on either the political or economic side, are not particularly involved in significant operational questions like the

question of devaluation of a currency. They're generally much more involved in reporting and on the economic side working with American businessmen. So I had great trouble finding anybody who could undertake this job. I finally decided on the economic counselor in Tehran. His name slips me at the moment. I had it on the tip of my tongue.

LC: That's okay. It will come back.

JM: Anyway, I decided on him and he agreed to go, but it turned out that he fell down on the very thing that I just mentioned. He had—not had any kind of operational experience. The embassy ambassador was not really pleased that he didn't have the kind of person that he really wanted in that job. Oh, his name was Bob Harlan. So Harlan came back in a few months. Fortunately, the extremely able guy who had preceded him agreed to take the job again. This was Chuck Cooper, not a career Foreign Service officer, but a very highly regarded employee of the RAND Cooperation. Cooper was A-1 in this job. So he agreed to undertake it again. That's how we had to settle that one eventually.

LC: Joe, can I ask whether some of the resistance that you were finding, particularly in the former job, the chief program officer position, was some of that do you think associated with some careerism on the parts of folks who rejected the job? In other words, they thought things were on the decline in Vietnam?

JM: No. I never felt that that was as much the issue as disagreement with the war policy and with the fact that we were at war in Vietnam, just as you have today the many disagreements that we should have gone into the Iraq war. In Jonnes's case, I think there may have been a pacifist element there, I'm not sure. But anyway, I don't think it was so much that they were looking at it from a career standpoint as from a very strong personal feeling standpoint on the policy.

LC: Interesting, I mean that the sort of resistance—

JM: Now what you mentioned may have been a factor, but if it did I was not aware of it and it didn't emerge, but maybe it was a subterranean factor.

LC: People it sounds like were more able to express their political disagreement than perhaps they would have wanted to acknowledge any kind of careerist opportunism.

JM: Oh, yeah. Right. True. Yeah, I wouldn't completely say that your idea was not present at all, but it never really occurred to me and I never felt I encountered it.

LC: How did you persuade—I don't know if Chuck Cooper had held an academic post or any other position, but how did you get him to agree?

JM: I can't remember. I think this was probably accidental. He decided that this was as challenging a job as he would have and he just decided to go back. I think he decided this himself. I don't think I talked him into it at all.

LC: He was bored in Santa Monica, maybe.

JM: Well, you know after you've been deeply involved in a very active operational job to get into a—shall I call it an academic atmosphere? It's not quite so exciting.

LC: Yes. Even I've found that. One other thing I wanted to just check very closely on, did Ambassador—was it Martin at this point?

JM: No, Bunker.

LC: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Yes. Did Ambassador Bunker have—did he essentially get rid of Bob Harlan?

JM: Well, I don't remember exactly how it came up. I think Harlan himself was not very happy or confident in the job. It didn't really reflect on his career, the fact that he came back from Vietnam. He subsequently became the consul general in Frankfurt, which was our biggest consulate general in the world. I had contact with him again when I inspected his consulate general in 1972, which I'll get to later in our discussions if you want to continue.

LC: Very, very much so I do. Yes.

JM: Bob and I remained personal friends, as a matter of fact. I know that he was disappointed that he didn't get an ambassadorial post. I remember when he decided to retire. I think I had a letter from him which expressed some nostalgic disappointment in that connection, which is quite understandable. That's true of a lot of Foreign Service officers.

LC: Absolutely, yes. Not everyone. It's not guaranteed.

JM: It certainly didn't affect Bob's career adversely since he got that top consulate general appointment in, as I say, our biggest office of that category in the world.

LC: Yeah, that's a real peach. Joe, one thing that may be of interest here is to just talk for another moment about borrowing folks from RAND and from other

organizations. Was it open to you to look to the ranks of the American employees at the World Bank or IMF (International Monetary Fund) for someone with these kinds of very specialized skills for dealing with currency issues?

JM: Well, Laura, I can't say that the thought passed my mind at the time. Maybe it should have, as a matter of fact. You should have been my assistant.

LC: Well, you have me now.

JM: Part of it was because probably I didn't know the people in those organizations and didn't know whom to turn to. So even if you made the general suggestion I would have started asking you, "How about some specifics?"

LC: Yeah. Right, "Give me a list." I see. Well, was there more—

JM: Laura, the other recruitment issue that I would like to bring up, I found when I went into the Vietnam Bureau in August of '68 that there was a great deal of recruitment of personnel for lower-level personnel for the AID mission and particularly for CORDS. As a matter of fact, the requirement those organizations, particularly CORDS had been expanding rapidly as you know. So the personnel requirements were extensive. AID had to fill a lot of them. When I went into the AID bureau I found that Jim Grant had set up a rather extensive what I call "hoopla razzle-dazzle" organization approach to recruit these personnel. Every few weeks a bunch of officials from the Vietnam Bureau would descend on a major city in the U.S. and talk to all the media, press, radio, television, and so forth to put out indications that we wanted personnel interested in going to Vietnam in certain capacities. Now in November of '68 Jim Grant told me that he thought that I should see how this operated. So he said, "You go to Phoenix with this group for a week," which I did. We, among other things, we got on either radio or television or both, I've forgotten which while we were there. I joined in somewhat reluctantly in all this hoopla. That kind of thing doesn't in any degree appeal to me, but I joined in. As it turned out this was the last use of that approach by the Vietnam Bureau because shortly thereafter it became clear that just as the president had established a ceiling on military personnel in Vietnam and Nixon, of course, had to indicate and began to come down, the same thing was true of civilian personnel. So very soon the requirements for the kind of numbers of personnel that we had been recruiting for Vietnam disappeared. So the Phoenix one in which I participated was the last razzle-

dazzle hoopla approach to this issue by the Vietnam Bureau. I might add again a personal note to this Phoenix visit of a week. While I was there I got in touch with a fellow by the name of Henry Stevens, a lawyer. I had become very close to him in my military service in Yuma during World War II. He was considerably, about twenty years older than I, but we became good friends and remained friends through that time but I had not seen him for twenty years. I got to Phoenix, which was where he lived, and by that time he was a state judge in Arizona. He arranged a dinner party at his house with a lot of the officers with whom he and I had served in Yuma.

LC: Oh, no kidding?

JM: So we had a wonderful reunion. Since I was a very low-ranking officer in Yuma, second and first lieutenant and by that time, of course, had attained a reasonably high position in the U.S. government I was very highly regarded by ex-officer colleagues and sort of made the lion of the party. So I look back on that occasion with a very pleasant view as well.

LC: Sure. Of course.

JM: Business and pleasure can be combined. Actually, Henry and I remained friends until he died, I think, in either the late 1980s or early 1990s. A lawyer who had never been especially successful as a lawyer, but he was an excellent judge. He was that kind of lawyer, not the kind who proceeds to do everything possible for a client no matter what the client may have done. So I was glad he had that judicial position, that he made a very fine end of his career.

LC: He was an ethical person it sounds like.

JM: Exactly. I still regard him very highly indeed. I look up to him both as a senior and as a friend.

LC: That's a great combination when you can have that. Joe, did you encounter any anti-Vietnam sentiment when you went out?

JM: No, interestingly enough, Laura, though it was developing, I did not. I did not on that hoopla tour. I did at some time. I might as well mention this now. I think we can wind up with this. I did in 1969 when Bill Sullivan's oldest daughter, Anne, who was then a student at Northwestern University, invited me to come to Northwestern to give a talk on Vietnam to those who were interested at the school. I went there and the

evening that I was giving the talk all of a sudden a group of people burst through the door, threw something at me which covered my face with a foamy substance—I think it proved to be shaving cream—but smeared me completely with it. That ended my talk at Northwestern University to the great embarrassment of Anne Sullivan, with whom we are still in contact, as a matter of fact.

LC: Oh, my good—did they come and lay hands on you, Joe?

JM: No, they threw a pie plate. Not a tin one. I think it was probably a cardboard one, but it smeared me completely and got it all over my face and chest. So I did have the kind of encounter you're talking about, but not in Phoenix.

LC: Well, yes, that's not to Northwestern's credit necessarily.

JM: It was happening in lots of universities. Not always with pie throwing, but it reminded me of the Max Sennett pie-throwing comedies I used to see as a kid in the shorts in the movies.

LC: So that kind of put the kibosh on the rest of the talk I suppose.

JM: Exactly. It ended at that point. I think we'll terminate this interview with that, Laura.

LC: Thank you, Joe.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [54] of [57]
Date: February 9, 2007

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joseph Mendenhall. Today is the ninth of February 2007. I am in Lubbock. As usual the ambassador is speaking by telephone. First of all, good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thanks for your time again today. You know how greatly I look forward to these interviews and also how much I appreciate you sharing your experiences.

JM: Well, I enjoy them myself, Laura.

LC: Very good.

JM: It's an inspiration to an old man.

LC: Well, it's certainly fun for me.

JM: It stirs up the blood, I guess.

LC: Terrific. That's what we want. That's great. Joe, we were last time discussing some of the experiences you had with AID in Washington. I wonder if you'd like to continue with that today.

JM: Yes, Laura, actually I concluded that particular topic. The next one I wanted to launch into was my third, final, and in many ways most significant trip to Vietnam during the year-and-a-half that I was with the Vietnam Bureau in AID in Washington. This trip occurred in August 1969 and involved considerable travel in the provinces. I first went to the III Corps, which was in the area immediately north of Saigon, which had throughout the entire war been a very difficult area. For one thing it bordered Cambodia, which favored the operations of the Vietnamese communists because they used it both as a sanctuary and as a means of bringing in equipment and men to supply their forces in Vietnam. Some of this came in through Sihanoukville, the principal port in Cambodia. Some of it came down through the Ho Chi Minh Trail and on into Cambodia. The principal civilian in the III Corps at that stage was Charlie Whitehouse, who like myself was a veteran senior Foreign Service officer, very able individual who subsequently became the number two in the embassy in Saigon, the deputy ambassador, and later

served as ambassador to Laos and Thailand and had a very distinguished career. He was also very much an establishment Washingtonian. I never found him a particularly warm individual, but I certainly did respect his ability. I thought it was particularly courageous, both personally and career-wise for him to take this assignment as the senior civilian advisor in the III Corps. I stayed over at night with him. Actually, he took me out to a site near the big Michelin rubber plantation northeast of Saigon, which had been very much a contested area throughout the war and was still quite insecure. We could hear very considerable firing while we were there but our overnight stay was uneventful, but it was fascinating to be so close to the activities that were the security activities, the actual fighting that was still going on in that area.

LC: Where did you stay, Joe? Do you remember?

JM: I think it must have been probably a district headquarters I suspect. I don't specifically remember now. I know it was I think right on the edge of the Michelin rubber plantation. So it's good to look back on it.

LC: Yes, sir. That was a very, very dicey area for many, many years.

JM: Exactly. Then I also went to II Corps, which was the lower part of central Vietnam, both coastal provinces and these three highland provinces, Darlac the provincial capital which is Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku and Kontum. I don't recall how extensively I traveled in that area, but the thing I do recall very specifically was being struck in the province of which Nha Trang was the capital, by how the security situation had improved from my previous visit in January or February of that year. The villagers were being moved back quite extensively into the coastal areas near the mountains. That is, they were being moved inland and those areas had been quite insecure and the villagers had fled from them as refugees during the very considerable fighting which took place in 1968 and early 1969, but by August they were moving back in considerable force into the villages and the rural areas that were closer to the mountains there. So that really impressed me as a sign of very considerable improvement in the security situation, particularly with respect to guerilla activities. Then I was invited by John Vann, the senior civilian advisor in the IV Corps area, the Mekong Delta area, the southernmost area in Vietnam to come down into his zone and visit. First his headquarters was in the city of Can Tho, C-A-N T-H-O, which is on one of the branches of the Mekong, as I

recall. It's on the Bassac branch of the Mekong. We first had a briefing at his headquarters and then just as night was falling he said, "We're going to get into a helicopter and go to the provincial capital of Kien Hoa province over on the coast." Now, Kien Hoa had long been a province with very strong communist forces present there. As a matter of fact, in 1960 at Tet time a reign of terror in that province had been one of the key indicators of the fact that South Vietnam was beginning to face full-scale guerilla warfare. This was 1969. So that province had been the site of very considerable fighting over the years. But we got in the helicopter to go to this provincial capital. We landed in it by the lights of a jeep. It was pitch dark when we got there, but that's how we landed. Then we stayed with and talked extensively with the American advisors in that province. I think actually we met the province chief as well. He may have been present I think at the American headquarters that night. I seem to think he was. Anyway, we talked until about midnight I remember and I was dead tired by that point and went to bed. John Vann was still carrying on with full energy and full force when I went to bed. He was a man who seemed inexhaustible in his physical resources. Anyway, that was a very interesting evening. Then the next day we went down into the southernmost province of Vietnam, which had also been consistently a very hairy area. Much of it was covered with mangrove swamps. We stayed overnight in the provincial capital there. I remember all during the night hearing artillery going off. Fortunately, it was outgoing fire and not incoming fire. So we weren't really disturbed, but the noise of it continued through the entire night. Then the next day we went over to the southwesternmost province next to Cambodia and had lunch with the province chief there and talked extensively with him. The dessert at lunch was fresh lychees. I don't know, Laura, whether you have ever eaten fresh lychees or not. You've probably eaten the canned ones.

LC: I have had the canned ones, yes.

JM: Well, the fresh ones are delicious. I love them. The province chief saw that I did and as I left he gave me a huge bag full of fresh ones to take with me.

LC: How wonderful.

JM: The next day I was leaving to return to the States and I hadn't been able to eat them all. So I put them in my luggage, but knowing that U.S. agricultural regulations

generally forbid the introduction of fresh fruit of anybody entering the United States, I was not surprised after declaring them on arrival in Seattle that the customs people told me, or the agricultural agent I suppose told me that I couldn't take them in. I said, "May I eat some here?" So I ate as many as I could in front of the customs and agricultural officials and I had to give the rest to them. I couldn't hold any more. That's how fond I am of fresh lychees, which I'm not sure one ever gets here in the United States, perhaps in some oriental stores now.

LC: Could be.

JM: They have a wide range of products. As you see, I did pretty extensive provincial travel during that visit. Back in Saigon I called on Ambassador Bunker and also called on General Abrams, who was the American commanding general in Vietnam, and asked during my talk with Bunker whether I could call on President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam. He promptly said, "Yes." I arranged the appointment through Thieu's special assistant, Nguyen Phu Duc. Now Duc was a Vietnamese whom I had known quite well ten years earlier in Washington when I first assumed duty as the Vietnam desk officer. He was stationed at the Vietnamese embassy in Washington. I don't think we had remained in contact, but we had had a very pleasant association ten years ago. So I had no trouble arranging to call on President Thieu through Duc. I had anticipated that Ambassador Bunker would want to accompany me to make sure I didn't say anything that was contrary to his policy in dealing with Thieu, but he told me to go ahead and call on him myself. So I went ahead and had about an hour alone with Thieu. When I walked in and he saw that I spoke French he quite visibly relaxed because since he was quite fluent in French he didn't have to go through a long interpreting process or try to understand with his limited English what was being said to him. Thieu was very interested in my report on what I had seen with respect to the security situation around the country. Incidentally, one thing I did not mention with respect to the IV Corps area, the Mekong Delta area, the security had so much improved there that Vann was driving around the entire Mekong Delta area alone on his bicycle without any security accompanying him whatsoever. So that was another very good sign of the way security was improving at that stage.

LC: He was riding on a bike around and about?

JM: A motorcycle. Motorcycle.

LC: A motorcycle. Oh, okay.

JM: On a motorcycle, yes.

LC: Goodness.

JM: Yeah. I had a very good session with Thieu. I found him very down to earth and very interested in getting what he felt would be an unvarnished report of what was going on. Laura, I also would like to pause a moment and give my assessment of John Paul Vann.

LC: Yes. I was going to ask you if you would.

JM: This is a man I know that you're quite aware of. I have the highest regard for Vann. I think he was probably the most experienced American in Vietnam during the entire war and perhaps the only real hero, in my estimation, who emerged from it. Vann had had altogether almost ten years' experience serving in Vietnam, which I think was broken at one point briefly, but that was almost continuous ten years' service. He was first assigned as a—he was a lieutenant colonel in the Army, first assigned as a military advisor, I think in My Tho, which is also a provincial capital on one of the branches of the Mekong. This was late '62, early '63. He happened to be the advisor at the time of what was a fairly widely-reported battle between the South Vietnamese forces and the Viet Cong in January of '63, Ap Bac, which you may have heard of also.

LC: Sure. Yes.

JM: Vann gave a completely frank report that the South Vietnamese were actually beaten there although the way it had been presented by the South Vietnamese government and, unfortunately, by our military AID mission in Vietnam as a victory by the South Vietnamese forces. But Vann always called the shots exactly as he saw them. Since he was very pessimistic at that stage about the way the fight was going in South Vietnam, his pessimism was in great contrast to the optimism of the MAAG in Vietnam, the Military Assistance Advisory Group, and of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington. His candor and frankness, as a matter of fact, cost him his military career. At one point he was supposed to brief the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington after he had returned to Washington from Vietnam, but Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cancelled that and pretty soon Vann resigned from the Army. That ended

his military career. Not too long afterwards he was employed by AID as a civilian to go to Vietnam. I think he went in either ’64 or ’65, probably ’65 to Vietnam. Then he was there from then on until 1972 when, as I indicated, later he was killed. Vann became the senior military advisor under CORDS, the pacification program, first in the III Corps area, then in the IV Corps area and finally in the II Corps area. So he had extensive service in almost all of the areas of South Vietnam. I think it was in my second trip to Vietnam in January of ’69, I got word from Vann that he wanted to bring into Saigon to see me a Vietnamese member of the National Assembly in the Parliament whom he had high regard for and who had a special theory as to how the war might be won. It turned out that this related to the South Vietnamese budget. I listened to the presentation by this Vietnamese member of the National Assembly, was not very impressed with his theory, but felt that since he seemed to be a very able and articulate individual he might have a political future in Vietnam and certainly Vann felt the same way. I didn’t dismiss him as simply being a crank at all, on the contrary. When I got back to Washington and recounted this incident to Bill Sullivan, who had been the ambassador in Laos for four years and by that time was back in Washington as the deputy assistant secretary in East Asia, the man who was the key figure in handling Vietnamese affairs for the State Department at that point. I told Bill about what Vann had done and Bill said, “Well, I’m sure Ellsworth Bunker, the ambassador, will look with askance on Vann’s involvement in this kind of political activity, that he would not want to put up with it.” But I didn’t say to Bill, but I suspect now that in view of what I’m going to say a little later even Bunker may have been a little leery about stepping too strongly on Vann even though Vann was straying into the political sphere, which is the responsibility of the ambassador. Vann was a pretty intrepid individual and I don’t think would have been easily put down on his activities. Vann was consistently pessimistic about the course of the war in Vietnam from his service in ’62-’63 as a military advisor right on until after the Tet Offensive in February of 1968. Vann assessed the outcome of the Tet fighting as a defeat for the communists, which I certainly agreed that it was, contrary to the reports of the American media. From then on he became an optimist. He saw gradual improvement in the situation. He had been so correct previously and I think was correct on the turnaround from the Tet Offensive on in 1968 until the U.S. decided to pull all its forces out of

Vietnam, unfortunately. As a matter of fact, he had such a reputation as a man who called the shots as he saw them that in 1969 President Nixon would summon Vann to the White House for a two-man discussion of the situation in Vietnam each time Vann was back in the States. Vann came twice to Washington in '69. Each time Nixon had him over to the White House to get this unvarnished assessment of how the situation was going. That indicates the kind of reputation that Vann had developed that it reached all the way to the president himself.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: Since I had invited Vann to dinner at our house out in the Virginia suburbs of Washington each time I had to wait in the office in the evening until Nixon had released Vann to come back to join me in the car to go out to our house for dinner. Interestingly, the first of those two times he went out for dinner with me he arrived at my office in the State Department and said, "May I bring Dan Ellsberg with me?" You've beard of Ellsberg.

LC: Absolutely. Yes, I've met him as well. Yes.

JM: I was a bit taken aback but I immediately said, "Yes." Ellsberg had already at that stage become rather well known as an anti-Vietnam war opponent. Ellsberg had already become pretty well known as a strong Vietnam War opponent. It was about I think a year or so later that he achieved the notoriety all over the U.S. by stealing the Pentagon Papers and furnishing them to the *New York Times*. Anyway, I agreed. So Ellsberg, Vann and I got into the car and drove to the house. As we arrived and I unlocked the front door and went in Nonie was there to greet us, but Vann just marched right passed Nonie, talking a blue streak as he usually did, totally ignoring her. I could immediately see that Nonie was furious that he hadn't even politely said hello to her. As a matter of fact, the whole evening Vann talked and Ellsberg said scarcely a word. The reason that Van had asked whether Ellsberg could come even though they were very much on the opposite sides with respect to the Vietnam War at that point they had been friends when Ellsberg served in Vietnam, I think, in the mid-'60s and had remained friends despite the shift in Ellsberg's position with respect to the war. Anyway, Vann dominated that evening and Nonie didn't emerge from it with a very high opinion of him at all because of the way she had been treated. Anyway, the next time that Vann was in

Washington, went to the White House, and then came to the State Department to go to the house with me for dinner he had Tom Barnes with him. You know Tom I know.

LC: I do indeed, yes.

JM: Now that evening was quite different. Vann greeted Nonie warmly and she emerged from that evening with quite a different view of Vann, as a matter of fact agreed with my very high evaluation of him. I think, now you've gotten the details of this I'm sure in your interviews with Tom Barnes. I think Barnes was probably at that stage just about to join Vann in Vietnam as one of his subordinate advisors. Anyway, I'm sure Tom described this in some detail to you. At the time of the big Hanoi Easter Offensive against the South Vietnamese forces in Binh Long Province northwest of Saigon in Easter of 1972, Tom was the senior civilian in that province, the senior provincial advisor on the civilian side. Actually, that battle finally ended in a victory for the South Vietnamese with very substantial air support from the U.S. I think a lot of the credit for that victory can go to Tom Barnes's courage, judgment, and endurance in participating quite directly, I think, in that battle. I don't know. Tom may have been modest enough that you didn't quite get that assessment of it, but I think Tom did a marvelous job when he was put to that test in Easter of 1972. [Barnes later told me in September 2008, that he was not in Binh Long at the time of the communist Easter Offensive in 1972. Therefore my recollection as recorded in this oral interview must be incorrect.]

LC: It won't surprise you, Joe, to know that he was rather modest in discussing it although I think I kind of pulled it out a little bit. I think we have a very good description of what he went through and your assessment is very helpful in kind of finishing off the larger significance of what he was doing there.

JM: Well, I give a great deal of credit to both Vann for reasons I've indicated and then to Tom for—Tom had extensive service and Tom spoke Vietnamese, too. I think he was our first—no. He was I believe probably our second Vietnamese language officer in the Foreign Service. Tom really pursued the language and spoke it very well. I think Tom probably indicated in your interviews with him that he spoke not only Vietnamese but Thai, Lao, and I believe a dialect of Chinese, I think, as I recall.

LC: Yes. He couldn't get enough. He also turned his hand to Japanese and Korean, I think also.

JM: Tom's a very remarkable individual.

LC: He is indeed, absolutely.

JM: Well, that I think winds up my third trip to Vietnam during this period I was serving in the Vietnam Bureau in AID. Back in Washington, Dr. Hannah, the head of AID, asked me to give a briefing at his senior staff meeting on my trip to Vietnam. I gave a very good assessment of the way security was improving. I think both Hannah and the other members of the staff were rather surprised at the way things were going in Vietnam at that stage because I'm sure they had been influenced by the press contrary to what one could have actually observe on the ground there.

LC: How did that go, Joe, that briefing that you gave? Were there expressions of doubt?

JM: Of doubt? No. No. Everybody seemed to be—I think they knew me well enough and that I'd had enough experience in Vietnam that, like Vann, I could make an accurate assessment through what I had observed. Actually, I look on that briefing as sort of the acme in my service in the Vietnam Bureau in AID. Indeed in many ways the culmination of my long association with Vietnam and Southeast Asia. I feel that the briefing went extremely well and was accepted as being an accurate view of the situation.

LC: Very interesting. What was Dr. Hannah's view? Did he talk with you? Did he interrogate you a little bit about what your findings had been or did he sit back and let you hold forth? Was there discussion?

JM: No, he let me [handle] it. I think I had talked to him before the staff meeting and given him a summary of my observations in Vietnam. He'd asked me to do the same thing for his senior staff meeting. He let me talk *in extenso* during this session of his senior officials.

LC: Can you think of others who were there?

JM: Certainly the heads of all the number two. I don't know whether Rud Poats was still number two or whether another man who had been the head of the Middle East Bureau of AID had succeeded him. I can't think of his name at the moment.

LC: That's okay.

JM: But anyway, the number two was there and the heads of all the geographic bureaus and indeed, I think, all the senior officials from AID were present at the staff

meeting.

LC: There would not have been State Department personnel?

JM: No. No. This was Hannah's AID staff meeting. No. This was not a State Department one. No.

LC: Were you in a position at this point to be asked by State Department folks for your assessment as you returned?

JM: I'm sure I briefed Bill Sullivan on this. Bill and I had remained very close friends and in view of his position in the State Department and mine in AID we worked closely together as well, just as we had done during the three years I was in Laos. So I'm sure I gave it to Bill, but I didn't brief anybody else in the State Department.

LC: I see, okay. Joe, let me ask one more question about John Vann, if I can. When had you first met him? Do you remember the circumstances?

JM: You know, I'm not sure I can remember when I first met Vann. I think I probably met him prior to that January '69 trip I made to Vietnam. I think I probably had, but I couldn't swear to it.

LC: You had left.

JM: I was not in Vietnam at all during the three years I was in Laos in '65-'68. I shouldn't say not at all. I remember changing planes in the airport in Saigon, but I was just at the airport, but I was not free to look around at the situation. After I left Vietnam in '62 the first time I was there again was in February of '65 on a trip. Then again I wasn't in Vietnam until August of '68. So I'm not sure I had met Vann. Possibly I had met him in Washington on one of his trips there prior to January of '69 but I couldn't swear to it, Laura.

LC: Okay. Okay.

JM: But as I say, I have the very highest regard for him, for his ability, and for his service. I might wind up by just saying about Vann he finally met his fate in a helicopter accident in, I think, it was the spring of 1972 when he was the senior civilian advisor in the II Corps area. To me, a great loss to the United States and to South Vietnam. In fact, I think had Vann been the senior advisor in II Corps area in the spring of 1965, the South Vietnamese debacle in evacuating that area, which really led to the downfall of South Vietnam, might not have taken place. I think it might have been

handled quite differently and future history might well have been changed by that. That is how high a regard I have for John and the influence that he had with respect to both the United States government and the South Vietnamese.

LC: That's fascinating. I hadn't thought of that but you may very, very well be right.

JM: That's one of the speculations that one can make about what might have been in history.

LC: Sure. Sure. Joe, where would you like to take us next?

JM: Well, I think, Laura, I'll mention some of my personal career aspirations at this point. During my service in the Vietnam Bureau, particularly with the change in administrations from the Democrat Lyndon Johnson to the Republican Richard Nixon, I tried to keep an eye open and also to do a little exploring for the possibilities of an ambassadorial post for myself. You may be interested in what happened there.

LC: Very much so. Yes. Absolutely.

JM: Before Jim Grant left the Vietnam Bureau at the end of 1968, he and I were called to brief Richardson—what was Richardson's first name? I can't think of it.

LC: Elliot?

JM: Elliot. Elliot Richardson, who was taking up the number two position in the State Department subsequently. You remember he became the Secretary of Defense. Grant and I briefed Richardson, I think, in December of 1968 before he actually assumed his duties. Of course, I tried to put my best foot forward in that because I knew he would be involved in the ambassadorial process.

LC: Sure. Sure.

JM: Richardson was a very nice individual, very easy to get along with, and I think a very able one as well. I had a high regard for him as well.

LC: Had you known him before this, Joe?

JM: No, I had not, but the man who became his special assistant, Jonathan Moore, was a man I had known, and I decided in early 1968 to have lunch with Moore to explore the possibilities. I had known Moore quite well when he was the special assistant to Bill Bundy as assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs when I was serving in that bureau. He was in that special assistant position in the year '64-'65 of my service there.

Then he came to Laos on a trip, I think in 1967. I gave him a tour around the countryside and he was extremely cordial and warm and impressed with what was happening in the rural areas of Laos at that stage. So I thought that he might be quite useful to me if I talked to him. It turned out that he seemed quite a different person during that lunch, rather distant and cool. I had no explanation for that in view of the relationships which I had enjoyed with him in the earlier years. That was the way that turned out. So it didn't really serve my purpose. I also had lunch with Bob Moore, no relation at all to Jonathan Moore. Bob Moore was a man I had known then for over twenty years because Bob had served in Ankara when I was in Istanbul. So I had known him then. He became the deputy chief of mission in Cambodia in, I think 1961. Nonie and I put him and his wife and three daughters up in our house in Saigon on their way to Cambodia. At least we had lunch. I'm not sure we could accommodate them. We had them for lunch anyway. So I had known Bob for a long time. He was then the deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of African affairs. So I thought I would touch base with him on my aspirations. He was very pleasant, but non-committal and I suspect then had very little to do with the ambassadorial process, though I did indicate to him that I would be open to an ambassadorial assignment in Africa. So those two I worked on. Then when Marshall Green became the assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs sometime in 1969, Bill Bundy, even though he was a Democrat, stayed over for several months under the Nixon administration, but Marshall Green who had been ambassador to Indonesia, was chosen by Nixon as Bundy's successor. I had worked extensively with Marshall. We also had been good personal friends for quite a number of years. So I felt rather optimistic that he was taking over that job as far as my aspirations were concerned. The question of the ambassadorship to Cambodia became open and I immediately indicated to Marshall that I would be quite interested in that. His response was, "Oh, you wouldn't want that." I thought that was a rather strange response, but again I didn't know why, but that was the way that one turned out. So then I also stayed in touch with John Steves, who was the director general of the Foreign Service whom I had also known personally for a number of years. As director general was the number one personnel man for the Foreign Service. I suspect that John, a very nice individual and able enough in his way, but I suspect he didn't have that much influence in the ambassadorial process, either. Those were the four

people I contacted who I thought might possibly be useful to me, but it didn't turn out positively obviously. Then in November or December of 1969, I found the explanation. One day Joe Toner, T-O-N-E-R, who had been an AID mission chief to some country, I've forgotten what, but who was then the head of personnel in AID, came into my office one morning and sat down to talk and said, "You know, Bill Macomber"—Bill Macomber who was, I think, the deputy undersecretary for management. I think that was his title. Anyway, he was about the number four official in the State Department. The chief official on the management and administrative side and certainly deeply involved in the ambassadorial process had come to Toner and said, "Oh, we want you to suggest some names in AID as possible ambassadorial nominees." Toner said to me, "The first one I suggested was, 'Why don't you look at your own Joe Mendenhall who has been with AID now for quite a number of years and who is very highly regarded in the agency?'" Macomber's response was, "Oh, well, we can't consider him because Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island, is strongly opposed to Mendenhall's getting any ambassadorial appointment." Since he's influential and a senior member of the Foreign Relations Committee, Macomber indicated that we weren't about to put Mendenhall's name forward. Well, this explained Moore's coolness and Marshall Green's sort of offhand reaction to my interest in Cambodia, which I had been puzzled about for many months. I'll tell you why Pell took the position he did. In July of 1968, and remember this is late '69 I'm talking about now, in July of '68, McMurtrie Godley who had been ambassador in the Congo and Laos, and his wife invited Nonie and me to join them for dinner at the Metropolitan Club in Washington one evening. This was after I had returned from—he was subsequently ambassador to Laos. He hadn't been ambassador at that point. Anyway, as we were finishing dinner Senator Pell, who had been dining alone, came over and joined our table. He and Godley were old personal friends. During the course of the talk about the Vietnam War after dinner, Pell took the very strong position that we should be pulling our troops out of Vietnam because the casualties were so high at that stage. This, remember, was not long after the Tet Offensive and the subsequent May offensive of the communists against the cities in Saigon. Casualties were running very high at that stage. I took umbrage at this. Pell even took the position, he made the statement that "It's better to be red than dead." To

me, that is absolutely scandalous on the part of a man who was destined to become chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. So I rose in strong dudgeon against Pell's wanting to pull the troops out. He said, "What else can we do? We're taking so many casualties." I said, and I shouldn't have said, I said, "Well, maybe we could consider use of atomic bombs in certain situations." Well, this set Pell off completely. I guess he asked Godley on the way out, they were talking just the two of them, who I was and he indicated that he was very upset by this idea I had thrown forward. That was the basis of his opposition to my becoming an ambassador. Well, after I learned from Joe Toner about Pell's position I immediately went over to see Bill Macomber. To my amazement his first response was, "Oh, Toner should not have told you that," which I thought was a rather strange position for the number one man in management of the State Department to take. I also felt that he had been pretty pusillanimous in not trying to get around Pell as far as my nomination as ambassador was concerned. As a matter of fact, the only time I had had a contact with Macomber before was not particularly a pleasant one. He may not have remembered it, but about a year earlier when he was the assistant secretary for Congressional Relations and I was number two in the Vietnam Bureau, we went rather hot and heavy over the telephone over a letter from a congressman about refugees in Vietnam. He thought our proposed response was not responsive and I was indicating this was as far as I felt we could go on the basis of the facts. Anyway, I told Macomber that I wanted to go see Senator Pell. I finally convinced him that he should have no objections to that. So I arranged for an appointment and went up to see Pell. I explained that when I had brought up this atomic idea that what I was thinking of was the possibility of dropping two atomic bombs on the two main choke points for infiltration from North Vietnam into Laos and then on down into South Vietnam. These two choke points at the western border of North Vietnam were essentially uninhabited. Well, Pell said, "Oh, I thought you meant you wanted them dropped on population centers in North Vietnam." I said, "No. No. No. I just put this forward as a possible idea for reducing American casualties, which seemed to be so influential as far as your position on Vietnam was concerned." He indicated that he was happy that I had clarified that, but he said he would still oppose my nomination for any ambassadorial post in East Asia because of the strategic importance of those countries,

but implied that he would not oppose me as far as any other country was concerned, outside the Far East, that is. I learned later that he was still expressing pretty strong opposition to my becoming ambassador anywhere. As a matter of fact, when I was finally nominated in the fall of 1972 to be ambassador to Madagascar and had to go before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Pell was not at my hearing, but called me immediately afterwards and said he had had to struggle strongly with his conscience as to whether he should be at that hearing and oppose me openly, which sort of put a damper on what I thought had been a successful appearance before the committee. He didn't really oppose me, but he certainly dampened my spirits about that. Clearly Pell always held the [hatchet] against me even though at the explanatory session I had with him I felt that he was not going to oppose me as far as any other country outside East Asia was concerned. So there was the reason, Laura, that I did not get any ambassadorial consideration with the change of administration in Washington in 1969.

LC: Joe, can I ask you a little bit about that meeting with Senator Pell? Did you have trouble securing a time on his calendar? Did they waffle?

JM: No. Not really. As I recall, no. Of course, it was at his convenience, but I don't recall any particular problem.

LC: The meeting previous to that with Macomber must have been rather uncomfortable, but it sounds like you were quite proactive and just sort of—can you describe the tone in that meeting?

JM: Well, as I say, I never felt any close personal relationship with Macomber at all. As a matter of fact, the thing that really stuck in my craw was that he didn't want me to know that Pell was opposing my nomination. I've never really been able to accept that as a valid position on the part of a senior official. He didn't want me to know that Pell was opposing my becoming an ambassador. If I didn't know it there was no way I could try to deal with the problem.

LC: It also puts him on Pell's side, in a sense.

JM: Yes, exactly. He didn't want to do anything that would arouse Pell against the State Department because he felt that Pell was extremely—I probably should put into the record also Pell had been a Foreign Service officer himself in the late '40s and early '50s. He had left the Foreign Service in 1952 in order to join the political campaign, it

must have been ’54 rather than—in order to join Averell Harriman’s campaign to become the Democratic nominee for governor in New York. So Pell resigned from the Foreign Service to enter the political sphere and was subsequently elected, oh, I think, in the early 1960s as a Democratic senator from Rhode Island. So Pell did have some relationship with the Foreign Service, which of course Macomber always played upon to try to benefit the State Department.

LC: As you mentioned, he, Macomber, had been head of the congressional relations effort in the State Department.

JM: Exactly. That’s right. Of course, as deputy undersecretary for management it was his job to get the annual State Department budget through Congress, through the Foreign Relations Committee and through the Appropriations Committee.

LC: So this sounds like a case where Joe Mendenhall’s head is on the block. That’s a price worth paying to get the appropriations through.

JM: Yeah. Right, but I still think I should have known about it.

LC: Well, I have to agree with you, just as an ethical matter and the fact that you were a longstanding member of the Foreign Service with a rating of one for some years at this point.

JM: Right. Well, Laura, I’ll leave that for now and we can continue with my story. Sometime in November or December of ’69 either Dr. Hannah or—it must have been Dr. Hannah I think because by that point I think Poats had left as number two. Excuse me. He indicated to me that the White House had decided to nominate a Republican as the assistant administrator for the head of the Vietnam Bureau in AID. I had been the acting. I had never been nominated formally to the position and submitted to the Senate. That position required Senate confirmation. I suspect the reason I was not nominated was because Hannah had also been made aware of Pell’s opposition by Macomber. I have no evidence of that, but I suspect that. Anyway, I had served as the acting head of the bureau for the entire year after Jim Grant’s departure. Hannah let me know that the White House had decided to nominate a Republican. The man to be the nominee was Bob Neuter, who was then the deputy head of the East Asian Bureau with AID. I knew Bob liked him and had high regard for him. Hannah said he would like me to become Neuter’s deputy. I thanked him and indicated that I was not interested in

reverting to the deputy position. In fact, I thought after four-and-a-half years on loan to AID it was time for me to return to the regular Foreign Service for the sake of my career.

LC: Yes.

JM: Actually, I think what lay behind the decision to appoint Neuter to take over the Vietnam Bureau was revealed shortly thereafter. When the Vietnam Bureau was folded back into the AID East Asian Bureau and Neuter was made the head of the combined bureaus—which made very good sense—it was Johnson who lifted it out of the East Asian bureau in 1967. By the end of '69 I think since we were winding down in Vietnam it made very good sense from both a bureaucratic and substantive standpoint to fold it back into the East Asian Bureau. I never felt that I was being discriminated against in not becoming the nominee to formally head the Vietnam Bureau at the end of 1969.

LC: It might have all come out the same way in the end.

JM: It would have. I think there was very good reason for the decision that was taken. As I say, I think for my own personal career standpoint it was wise to get back into the regular Foreign Service at that point. The other thing I'd like to mention, Laura, before we sign off on this is that Dr. Hannah indicated shortly before I left that he wanted me to join him for lunch on the eighth floor of the State Department, where the senior officials of the department had their dining room, as a farewell. To my surprise when I got there I found that Hannah had assembled all of the senior staff of AID for this farewell luncheon for me. I was really so surprised I was stunned by it. I hadn't anticipated that at all. I found during the luncheon that my colleagues in AID, the heads of the other bureaus, I thought a lot of them probably didn't have very fond recollections of me because I had fought to take some of their best people away from them and send them to Vietnam. But I got very good vibes from all of them and as a matter of fact look back on that luncheon with very distinct pleasure and gratitude to Dr. Hannah for organizing it. Since I was an outsider, in effect, assigned to AID, a regular Foreign Service officer, and had felt during that entire year that I was as much an assistant administrator of a bureau as any of the rest of them nobody had ever even hinted that because I was acting rather than fully nominated and approved that I was not quite equal in status to them. I felt I'd always been treated in effect as the assistant administrator by

Hannah as well as by my colleagues on the same level. So that was, to me, a very fine send off from AID.

LC: Joe, as we wind this up, I wonder whether you might offer an appreciation of John Hannah.

JM: Well, I think Hannah was a very good administrator, head of AID because of his long experience in dealing with politicians as the president of Michigan State University. He had obviously had abundant experience in getting appropriations for the university over the years and knew how to deal with politicians. I felt that he was quite effective in the way that he handled Congress, which of course is one of the principal responsibilities of the head of AID and of the administration, to get appropriations for the agency. I developed a good personal relationship with him and I certainly came to respect him.

LC: Did you have a sense of his view of the Vietnam conflict in general?

JM: Well, I think Hannah was quite supportive of the war in Vietnam. After all, Michigan State University had been operating there for a long time with its two contracts with the AID mission in the fields of administration and police work. So he was quite well acquainted with Vietnam for that reason. So I look back on my association with him as both a fruitful one and a pleasant one from a personal standpoint.

LC: Very good, Joe. Let's take a break there.

JM: I want to make a final statement. I was on loan for four-and-a-half years to AID. I look back on this in many ways as the best experience of my career because for one thing, I had much more dealings with Congress than I would ever have had as a Foreign Service officer. Second, I certainly learned an immense amount about management and administration, which I would never have picked up as a Foreign Service officer. So I can look back on those four-and-a-half years with excellent recollections. I would just like to make that point as we conclude. This in effect ends my long association with Southeast Asia, which started in the fall of 1955, lasted to the end of '69. So it was almost fifteen years of service and experience with that area. So in a way, this is a swan song, Laura.

LC: Well, I hope, Joe, that you will continue talking with me about what happens with your further appointments.

JM: Laura, I'm open to it if you want it.

LC: Oh, I absolutely do, sir.

JM: In subsequent interviews there will be only one reference to Southeast Asia again. That was one that really ended in nothing, but it may be of interest to explore that as we go along.

LC: Okay. Well, let's continue—

JM: The rest of my Foreign Service career from 1970 through my retirement in 1975 was completely unrelated to this area with which I had been associated for so long and the area, which, in many ways, I think is your chief interest. If you want to continue I shall be glad to do so.

LC: Very good. Thank you.

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I have the privilege of continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall today, which is the sixteenth of February 2007. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking by telephone. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Joe, you mentioned to me off tape that you had an observation that you wanted to contribute here at the outset.

JM: Yeah. Laura, first I'll say that in December of 1969 the director general of the Foreign Service, John Steeves, who among other things is the head of personnel in the Foreign Service, learned that I was leaving AID and telephoned me to offer me a job as a Foreign Service inspector. Steeves had done the same thing a year-and-a-half earlier when I came back from Laos and I had declined it that time. This time I decided to accept and the reason I accepted—I didn't have any other alternative offers of job assignments at that point, which is one reason, but the main reason I decided to accept was that I thought that the Foreign Service Inspection Corps would be a good waiting place for one of the two things I hoped might happen as far as I was concerned in the future. One was to become a regularly appointed ambassador to some country, but since there were no specific prospects of that in the offing that was more a hope than based on reality at that stage. The second possibility—and it was a distinct possibility—was to take over as the ambassador in charge of CORDS, the pacification program in Vietnam. I think I've indicated that Bob Komer was the first ambassador in charge of that. He was actually the author of that program, both in Washington and then in Vietnam. He served as the first ambassador. He left Vietnam in November 1968 and was succeeded by Bill Colby, who had been working for him. Colby, as you know, later became the director of CIA.

LC: Yes.

JM: So Colby held that post from November of '68 on. In early 1970 at the time frame I'm talking about it, looked as though Colby would be coming out pretty soon

because his oldest child, a daughter, was a very serious epileptic and was seriously worsening at that stage. So it was expected that he would come out in order to be with his family in Washington. Bill Sullivan, who was the chief man responsible for Vietnam in the State Department, he was the deputy assistant secretary for East Asia but handled Vietnam. The assistant secretary, Marshall Green, at that stage just turned Vietnam completely over to Bill Sullivan. Green didn't get involved at all and Sullivan dealt directly with Henry Kissinger. Well, at that stage it was still Rogers. Kissinger didn't come in for a couple of years. Anyway, Sullivan, during the time he handled Vietnam in the State Department from '69 on to I think it was '72 when he left to become ambassador to the Philippines, Sullivan dealt directly with the secretary of state. But Sullivan was pushing me very strongly to succeed Colby when Colby came out and was so confident that this would take place, which bolstered my expectations, that he telephoned the inspector general after I was assigned there and warned him not to expect me to be long with the Inspection Corps because he expected me to be going to Vietnam in this role. So that certainly backed up my hopes in this area. Marshall Green also said to me—he was less explicit. He said rather meaningfully the Inspection Corps is a good, quote, "waiting place," closedquote. Anyway, I felt fairly optimistic about this possibility of an assignment for the future, but Colby actually prolonged his tour, not only through the whole year in 1970, but well on into 1971. So I was sort of on tenterhooks for a quite a long time in the Inspection Corps, always hoping and waiting for the call, which did not come. However, in March of 1971 when I was inspecting in Geneva in Switzerland, I got a telephone call from Sam Berger, the number two in the embassy in Saigon, the deputy ambassador also with the title of ambassador, who was in Paris at the moment, asking me to come up to Paris and talk to him. So I flew up to Paris. He started talking about the successorship to Colby as the ambassador in charge of CORDS. I indicated I would be interested. He then said, "Well, Ambassador Bunker is fully aware of the circumstances under which you left Laos," implying that Bunker might have some hesitation because of the way I exited Laos. Anyway, the whole tenure of the talk with Berger again encouraged me that this opportunity might open up fairly soon in the future. Then in the summer of 1971, a few months later in July when I was back in Washington for my semi-annual consultation as an inspector, Ambassador Bunker, who happened to

be in Washington on a consultation at that time, too, telephoned to invite me for lunch on the eighth floor of the State Department, shall I call it the big-wig dining room.

LC: Sure.

JM: Anyway, Bunker and I—I met him at his office and he and I started for the eighth floor. We got stuck in the elevator for twenty minutes to a half-hour on the way up. By the time we got to the dining room it was about to close so all we could do was have a quick sandwich, which we bolted down. Then I went with him to his office. I kept expecting Bunker to start talking about this CORDS possibility, but he never opened up on that subject. He was, I'm sure, looking me over, assessing me for this possibility, but he never actually raised it. That is a further indication of what the Vietnamese, particularly President Thieu, came to call Bunker. He was known to the Vietnamese as "The Sphinx" because he was so unreadable. He certainly knew when he should keep quiet and that was very, to me, fascinating coming from Thieu who was as wily a Vietnamese I think as any I never encountered. They're a very wily people. Here he thought that Bunker was even wilier than he was, that he had out-wiled even the Vietnamese wiles expert. As I said, I went back with Bunker to his office and pretty soon I began to feel embarrassed about staying on because what I was expecting never came up. Then I went on to Greece as my first inspection assignment for the second half of '71. I thought I made a sufficiently good impression on Bunker that he probably would accede to my nomination. In Greece I kept waiting for the call, which actually didn't come and in fact never came. What actually happened was the Nixon administration, which as you know by the summer of '71 was rather rapidly winding down the combat role of U.S. troops in Vietnam by withdrawing substantial numbers of U.S. forces every few months under congressional pressure, decided to wind down CORDS as well. No successor to Colby was ever actually appointed as the CORDS ambassador. Colby's deputy, George Jacobson, took over during this final wind-down period for CORDS. In view of the fact that U.S. forces were being pulled out so rapidly and the fact that most of the six thousand employees of CORDS were military personnel, it certainly made good sense from a national standpoint to wind down CORDS as well. That ended, Laura, my last glancing association with Vietnam and Southeast Asia since the call never came to be ambassador to CORDS.

LC: Was there ever any suggestion at this point or later that you might be ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam?

JM: No. No. No. I think not. One of the reasons I was fairly confident in this CORDS assignment as ambassador is that it was not subject to confirmation by the Senate and therefore Senator Pell's objection to me would not come into play. Whereas any regular assignment as ambassador held this sort of bad prospect for me, because I'd gotten indications that despite my call on Pell, which I described the last time, he was continuing to express very considerable apprehensions about me. So I felt that there was considerable likelihood he would oppose any assignment. As long as Macomber was the deputy undersecretary for management in the State Department playing a big role in making ambassadorial recommendations to the White House, I felt there was little real prospect of my even being proposed by my own department. There was no talk of that at all, Laura. In retrospect, I came to feel that it was probably just as well that I did not get a call as the CORDS ambassador for several reasons. One, it became clear, of course, that what I would be doing was not really operating in the pacification program, but winding down CORDS. In other words, it would not have been a very substantive assignment at all. Second, had I held that post I probably would never have gotten subsequent confirmation by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as a regularly appointed ambassador because I would have been tarred with the Phoenix Program, the alleged political assassination program. The Phoenix Program which, as you know, was designed to try to ferret out the communist infrastructure in the villages in Vietnam and bring those cadres under control. Some, of course, were actually killed. As you know the Phoenix Program did acquire a reputation which was not of the best. Colby had an approach to Congress and even to others of ambiguity and managing to weasel-like evade this kind of charge. I don't have that kind of capability, unfortunately. Maybe a politician—I suppose politicians should. I am much more direct. If somebody attacks me I then defend myself on substantive grounds, which is not always the best approach in dealing with Congress. So for those two reasons, as well as the fact that the Foreign Service does not really lend much credit to service as an ambassador outside the regularly constituted channels of nomination by the president, confirmation by the Senate and acceptance of the credentials as ambassador by a foreign government. The best evidence

of that is the Foreign Service never really recognized Komer's contribution as ambassador, which to me, by devising the only really successful pacification program, which we had been aiming for for years in Vietnam and then carrying it out in Vietnam, I think Komer deserves immense credit as the ambassador, a job certainly far more important than a regularly appointed ambassador to a second or third rank and to me even more important than an ambassador to any country in terms of the national interest of the United States. Komer was the one who devised the unique combination of military personnel and civilian personnel, which had never been successfully achieved, that integration never successfully achieved before in Vietnam. With his appointment as a deputy commander of the U.S. military forces and specifically assigned to pacification, this was a unique contribution of his. Plus the fact that he melded American and Vietnamese personnel very effectively together in operating the pacification program in Vietnam. I give Komer immense credit. I know Komer could be a difficult personality, but I take my hat off to him in this respect and I think there's a lot to be learned in Iraq from what Komer did in Vietnam. I hope General Petraeus is aware of it.

LC: That's just what I was thinking, Joe. The model is an interesting one.

JM: It certainly doesn't reflect well on the Foreign Service. I think it's myopic in the way the Foreign Service can evaluate ambassadors outside the regular sphere of their activity.

LC: Well, and it's not a type of posting that comes up with real frequency.

JM: Oh, no. It's been unique in Vietnam so far. We don't have that kind of individual in Iraq even at this stage. As a matter of fact, we're getting complaints as you know from the Defense Department that the Foreign Service is falling down on furnishing personnel for service out in the provinces in Iraq, which the Foreign Service did. What I'm not sure with respect to these present complains of the Defense Department whether they're really talking about regular Foreign Service personnel or whether they're talking about AID personnel because AID is a part of the State Department now, but it's a separate career service from the regular Foreign Service.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: Certainly in CORDS in Vietnam when it really began to operate, there were more AID personnel assigned to CORDS than there were State Department, regular State

Department Foreign Service, but there are certainly some noted examples of the State Department Foreign Service personnel who were assigned. One of them I mentioned last time, Charlie Whitehouse, who was the head of the chief civilian in III Corps, the hairy area that you and I have been talking about recently. Barney Koren, who was the head of II Corps. Another very prominent example, of course, was Phil Manhard who had been my deputy in the State Department at one stage and subsequently was captured by the communists as the chief CORDS civilian in the province in which Hue is located, Thua Thien, during the Tet Offensive in 1968. Phil Manhard was held for five years in solitary confinement in Hanoi. I talked to Phil. I assumed, as most people did, that Phil—I think I've mentioned this—was dead. His wife never gave up hope and Phil was released when American prisoners were set free in 1973. I subsequently talked to Phil and I think I've mentioned this in a previous session. Phil told me that all he had to occupy his time in five years of solitary confinement was boxes of matches, devising various things that you could do with matches. I think any normal person would have gone absolutely insane, but it did not adversely affect Phil. I think that is an excellent example of the way the Foreign Service entered into the pacification program in Vietnam. I hope it's being held—I hope Manhard's example is being held forth by the State Department now to Foreign Service personnel. I'm not sure it is. I don't think the same kind of discipline applies in the Foreign Service today, which did in my day. I always considered the Foreign Service, during the years I was there as, in effect, a paramilitary organization. You went where you were told to go. When you became more senior you did have an opportunity to discuss your assignments. Senior personnel could turn assignments down if they didn't feel that it fitted what they should be doing. Essentially, it was I think a much more disciplined service than we have today. In fact, the Foreign Service personnel system was modeled by the Foreign Service Act of 1946 on the Navy's in this respect, that you were either promoted after a certain number of years in class or out you went. Your career was over. One of the things that could affect that was your attitude toward accepting assignments, of course. I don't remember in my earlier years any junior officer turning down any assignment which he received, but as I say, I'm not sure I have as high a regard for the Foreign Service today as I did in the years I served. Part of it, of course, is because there are husband and wife teams now and there's an

effort since wives are so much more interested in careers than they were in our day. A career Foreign Service wife in my day was what she did in the Foreign Service as the [wife] of the Foreign Service officer. Today the wives want careers and the State Department seeks to assign husbands and wives the same post so they won't be separated. That, of course, is a troubling factor in the assignment process. Anyway, Laura, I think I can leave that subject at this stage. You may have some questions you want to raise.

LC: Well, I was interested in your view of how recruiting to the Foreign Service has also changed. It's certainly one of the things one encounters on a college campus at an employment fair, for example. One could see the Foreign Service there, actually, not just the Foreign Service, but the Department of State recruiting for both the Foreign Service and AID. That sort of thing didn't really go on in the late 1940s when you were recruited.

JM: No. No.

LC: Does that make a difference, too, as to the discipline?

JM: Certainly for the regular Foreign Service and I think for the AID agency in its earlier years it wasn't necessary to engage in that. There were plenty of applicants for the examination. The regular Foreign Service examination was usually taken by about twenty thousand people. Eventually about two hundred out of that were commissioned as Foreign Service officers. So there was a huge pool to draw from without engaging in active recruitment on campuses at that time.

LC: Well, and you certainly get a different group of people when they're not actively self-selected, I suppose.

JM: Right.

LC: Well, Joe, if you would I'd be interested in knowing how you started off with the inspectorate general. Can you say something about that corps within the—

JM: I shall, Laura. You I thought wanted to raise some additional questions about Vietnam even though my association had ended.

LC: Yes. I thought I might ask you about the spring of 1970, and particularly President Nixon's decision to send forces, in some ways finally send forces, across the border into Cambodia to break up the supply routes that were feeding the extension of the

insurgency in South Vietnam. When you heard about that—

JM: I was a thousand percent in support of it.

LC: I would have thought probably.

JM: Yes, because it fitted perfectly with my own view of the great strategy error we made in not looking at Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam as a unit in the Vietnam War, that we should have moved early on to cut the infiltration routes for men and supplies from North Vietnam down to South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trails in Laos and the same thing in respect to Cambodia. Although I don't think Cambodia was as important as the route down through Laos, it was still quite significant. Some supplies certainly came through Sihanoukville, the principal port of that country, for the communists. Certainly it was used as a sanctuary by the Vietnamese communists. Whenever they were hard pushed in Vietnam they just retreated across the border into Cambodia and couldn't be touched until Nixon decided in April of 1970 to move to destroy them. I thought one of the greatest tragedies was the kind of public and congressional reaction he got in the States, which after, what, about a month I think, forced us to pull our troops out of Cambodia, because I thought that was an extremely wise and certainly an effective move, the consequences of which were nullified by the subsequent forced early withdrawal from Cambodia. I felt the same way about the attempt to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail in, I think it was, what, February of [1972] by the Vietnamese. We were supported to some extent by air, I think, but not otherwise. The communists were so strong in the Ho Chi Minh Trail they were able to inflict very substantial damage on the South Vietnamese forces who went in there. So the South Vietnamese had to pull out. That attempt by the South Vietnamese to cut or reduce the effectiveness of the Ho Chi Minh Trail was thoroughly consistent with the strategy that I'm talking about. Both of those things I strongly supported. Both failed for the reasons that I've just indicated, unfortunately, but I don't think that really reflects discredit on the decisions to go into first Cambodia and later Laos.

LC: Were you surprised that President Nixon decided to make this move? He had to certainly know that it would just be disastrous.

JM: Yes. I was surprised in a way at the time, although in retrospect Nixon was the kind of man who I think pulled real surprises in his foreign policy, moves such as the

bombing of Haiphong at Christmas in 1972. We had never done that before because we were afraid that we would damage or destroy Russian vessels delivering arms there and create a crisis with Russia. Nixon decided that on balance it would be better to take this risk. That was the thing that finally brought about the North Vietnamese communists' signature—for whatever it was worth—of the final agreement on Vietnam between us and the North Vietnamese.

LC: And secured the release of the POWs immediately thereafter.

JM: It secured that release, right, which was the only thing we really got out of it, of course.

LC: That's really true. That's really true.

JM: Important, but there are other things that are also important.

LC: Absolutely. But Nixon's—

JM: His move into China was a great—I think that a president should be prepared to take this kind of sudden, surprising decision if it is in the national interest. I don't think one should be overly cautious in executing foreign and military policies. As I say, I think this was consistent with Nixon's approach to foreign policy. I think Nixon was one of the greatest foreign policy presidents we've ever had. As far as his domestic policies were concerned, I can take issue with a number of those. Of course, his foolishness over Watergate, which was not essential for his re-election as president, his judgment at times proved to be quite [foolish]. That's I suppose a mild way of expressing criticism of that episode.

LC: How much of his foreign policy success do you credit to Dr. Kissinger?

JM: Oh, I give a lot of credit to Kissinger and I think Kissinger's books show this. It was Nixon who really made the final decisions, not Kissinger, just the same way as I think today it's Bush, not Cheney or Rumsfeld, who made the final decisions with respect to the war in Iraq.

LC: I'm sure that's right. I think you're exactly right, Joe. Well, thank you for those observations.

JM: Right.

LC: Joe, go ahead if you will and start us with the story of your work with the inspector general's office.

JM: Okay, Laura, well first let me say that the inspection of embassies and consular posts abroad every two years is mandated by law. The Foreign Service Act of 1946 contains the very provision that I have just mentioned and therefore the State Department in performing inspections is carrying out a legislative mandate. I think the State Department had proposed its inclusion when the Foreign Service Act of '46 was being drawn up, but it was adopted by Congress and stands as law. There had been inspections prior to that act, but I think that they were probably much more limited. I say probably because, Laura, my experience with the Foreign Service began in '46, actually about three months before the Foreign Service Act was adopted. I lived under that act for the twenty-nine years I was active in the Foreign Service. So that's what I'm familiar with and not terribly familiar with what went before. What went before with respect to inspections was concentration, I think, almost exclusively on the administrative and financial operations of an embassy. By financial operations I mean the actual money made available to the embassy by the State Department and what was collected in the way of fees. I don't think the inspections were really broad at all prior to the 1946 act. One of the most famous episodes of inspection prior to '46, I think I may have mentioned earlier but I'm going to repeat it at this stage.

LC: Okay.

JM: In 1944, Merle Cochran, who I think was probably the only inspector in the State Department at that time, was asked by the State Department to go to Turkey to investigate reports of black market finance activities by American officials in Turkey. State Department allowances for Foreign Service personnel in Turkey, as in other countries, were based on the official rate of exchange. If Foreign Service personnel there were engaging in black market operations, exchanging their dollars for Turkish lira on the black market, they obviously were profiting because they were getting their allowances and additional advantage through the black market. So the State Department sent Merle Cochran out. He arrived first in Istanbul. That was my first assignment, but this was two years before I got there. The incident was still very famous even two years later. His first words were, "Gentlemen, lock your desk drawers and give me the keys." He found evidence that the commercial attaché in Istanbul had been engaging in the black market. Then he went on to Ankara. He found similar evidence with respect to the number two

officer in the embassy. Indeed, I think, the ambassador was probably involved as well, but the ambassador was a close political friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt. So the ambassador was not punished the way the other two—the careers of the other two were terminated.

LC: So the ambassador was a political appointee?

JM: Yes. His name was Steinhardt. He later became ambassador to Russia for Roosevelt. But anyway, the number two in the embassy and the commercial attaché in Ankara and the commercial attaché in Istanbul both saw their careers come to an end over this, which of course left a deep impression throughout the Foreign Service obviously.

LC: I'm sure.

JM: That is the only real incident I am aware of about the Inspection Corps prior to 1946, a very dramatic one obviously. Over the years subsequent to '46 the inspection function was gradually broadened. By the time I became an inspector at the beginning of 1970, we were expected to look at U.S. broad interests in the country we were inspecting, the U.S. policies to carry out those interests, and how the embassies and/or consular posts were effectively serving, carrying out those policies. We had the broadest possible mandate as inspectors at that stage. If the inspector decided to give it the importance, which I think it deserved, it could make the inspection function much more interesting than it had been earlier.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JM: We continued to look at how the Foreign Service post was acting in other respects, administrative and economic, commercial, political, and so on, but we did not actually get down into the details of the financial operations of the Foreign Service posts because by the time I entered there was a separate group of financial auditors sent out by the State Department to look at that aspect of operations of our posts abroad. So we didn't get down into the nitty gritty, thank God.

LC: Joe, what division or bureau housed those auditors who came out? Do you know?

JM: It was somewhere in the administrative set up. They may have fallen under the inspector general. I'm not sure. I don't really recall, Laura.

LC: But they had these special people who were bean-counters, presumably, who went out and looked.

JM: Exactly. Exactly.

LC: As an inspector you had this much broader brief.

JM: That's right. We also at that time were charged with writing efficiency reports on every American assigned to the post we inspected, both the officers and the secretaries, file clerks, communications clerks and so on. Since inspectors' efficiency reports were regarded by—I think I mentioned this before—by promotion boards as being more objective than those of the immediate superiors, these reports were looked at by the personnel as being extremely important to the future of their careers. Since we were required to show the reports to the people we were evaluating, I know I've mentioned to you in these interviews that I had to be prepared to justify and defend every statement I made in the reports and the interview when I showed the report to the individual concerned because his future depended on it.

LC: Right.

JM: I can say personally it took a lot out of inspectors, but was certainly to me an important function. I think I've mentioned before that I got the very nice commendation from a friend of mine in personnel subsequently that in personnel they began to ask when somebody was being considered, "Is there was a Mendenhall efficiency report in his file?" which made me feel good, but I spent a lot of blood and effort in preparing those reports.

LC: I can well believe it. Yes.

JM: Laura, as a further indication of the broadening of the Foreign Service inspection function after the 1946 act of Congress, inspectors were set up as teams, a senior substantive inspector who looked at the overall management of the post and the political and economic and commercial functions and an administrative inspector who looked at the administrative and consular functions of the post. So we went out as two-man teams during the entire period when I served as an inspector. Sometimes we were four-man teams at larger embassies and the two senior substantive inspectors and two administrative inspectors. The senior of the two senior inspectors was the man really in charge. That was a further indication of the way the inspection function had been

extensively broadened after the 1946 act.

LC: Would the four-man teams then have been dispatched to the larger embassies with more personnel?

JM: We inspected the larger—for example the, first two countries to which I was sent, Italy and the UK, the embassies were very large and we had four-man teams for those two embassies.

LC: Yes, I would think so. Both of them huge. Joe, did you have any kind of read-in or training for this or did they assume your career was your training?

JM: Yes. In this respect, Laura, each January the inspectors spent in Washington being briefed not only by the inspector general, but by the heads of the geographic bureaus and heads of other bureaus of the State Department so as to have a broad view of U.S. foreign policy. As well as we got specific information by calling on not only the assistant secretaries in charge of the geographic bureaus, but also right down the line to the desk officers before we went. Of course, during this month of briefings the inspector general would outline his expectations as far as the inspectors were concerned and issue any instructions that he wanted to give generally and then would meet with each inspector individually before we went out. So we did have that month each year where you can call it orientation, I suppose, more than training, which was quite useful to us.

LC: I would think so, particularly since you wouldn't have had an opportunity to be keeping up, for example, on exactly what the issues confronting U.S.-Italian relations would be.

JM: Exactly. I'm going to mention though, Laura—let me just say in general that during my two-and-three-quarters years as an inspector, I found that by and large our posts abroad were operating very effectively, that I did not have significant criticisms of the way most of them were operating. But the one consular post where I did find things were not going well at all, I got no forewarning from either Washington or from the embassy before we went to that consular post. So it was a great surprise to me when I got to the post. We're not always warned in advance what problems there might be at a post. Maybe in this case the department and the embassy were not aware of it. I don't know. But certainly nothing gave us an indication that this post—that there were real problems at this post and yet it began to come out. We were at the post only three days and it

began to come out the first day at the post. That officer retired as a result of that inspection.

LC: Oh, boy. Joe, would the normal process be that you would go to the embassy first?

JM: That's right. Before we went to the consular post we would go to the embassy, again for briefing with respect to the consular post to discuss any problems and to get a general overview of how the consular posts were operating.

LC: Joe, let's take a break there.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [56] of [57]
Date: March 9, 2007

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech. I am continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Mendenhall. Today is the ninth of March 2007. I am in Texas on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock. The ambassador is speaking from Nevada. Good morning, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: I'm happy to have the chance to speak with you again as always. Joe, could you go ahead and complete the sort of preliminary description of your work with the inspector general?

JM: Yes, Laura. The first thing I would like to discuss of wider interests than specific inspections abroad is the two inspectors general under whom I served. The first one was Fraser Wilkins, who had been ambassador to Cyprus and served as inspector general for six years or more. A very pleasant individual, but scarcely dynamic and I'll explain what I mean by that. The inspectors were briefed before they went abroad among others by the assistant secretaries in the geographic bureaus who raised with them any problems which they wanted the inspectors to move into. Then they were debriefed when they came back by the assistant secretaries as well as by the people farther down the line in each of the geographic bureaus in each area in which they conducted inspections. In addition, the geographic bureaus as well as the posts abroad responded to the inspectors' recommendations with respect to the posts in the countries inspected responded to the recommendations in writing both, as I say, from the posts abroad and from the geographic bureaus farther down the line, which was all right as far as it went. It meant that some attention was paid to the inspectors' recommendations, but I had the very strong feeling that once those written responses had been made sometimes they simply expressed disagreement with the inspectors' recommendations, giving some reasons, of course, for the disagreement. Other times they indicated that action would be initiated, but there was never really any follow-up on those actions. So at that point I felt that the inspections had limited value in a substantive sense. I think they were very useful as far as rating each American in the post abroad was concerned since the

inspectors' evaluation reports were considered much more useful to the promotion boards than the ones by immediate superiors. So it seemed to me that what we were doing was of limited use in a substantive sense at that time. In addition, I would point out that Fraser Wilkins had allowed—maybe that is too strong a term to use—the inspector general's office to be moved several blocks away from the main State Department building. Once out of sight, out of mind is a pretty useful application in the bureaucracy. I think that indicates also that there wasn't great attention being paid in the State Department to this legislatively-mandated function of inspection of each post every two years. Also, I had the rather strong feeling that those who were assigned as inspectors in exceptional cases were excellent officers, particularly those who were using it as a waiting place for their higher assignments or nominations, but in too many cases ambassadors who might have served in one post abroad without any distinction or officers somewhat down the line whose careers were very clearly approaching their culmination were assigned to the Inspection Corps so that a lot of the inspectors were not particularly impressive as very able substantive individuals. I would add that in my experience I found the same thing was all too often true in assignment of Foreign Service officers to the function of training new officers entering or giving senior training to more advanced officers. Again, it seemed to me that all too often the department assigned officers whose careers seemed to have reached their top point and would not go any farther. I would make an exception in that case of many of the ambassadors who were assigned as the State Department representatives to the key senior training institutions such as the National War College, the war colleges of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and the senior training course at the Foreign Service Institute. I think by and large those were men who had served in a distinguished way and were men who had shown their capabilities. I suppose the explanation in both cases of assigning what I might call all too often "also-rans" to both the inspection and the training function was that the ablest officers tended to be reserved for the line jobs in the State Department and in embassies abroad. I suppose in a sense that is the more important function, but all three should receive as much priority as possible, in my view. So that gives you rather some review of where the Inspection Corps stood in general in my estimation at the time I entered it under Fraser Wilkins. I entered it at the beginning of 1970. I think it was in mid-'71 a

new inspector general was named. The name just suddenly—oh, McIlhaney, Tom McIlhaney. He had been serving as ambassador in Ghana. As a matter of fact, when I was inspecting in next-door Togo, I drove over with our ambassador to Togo to meet McIlhaney in Accra, the capital of Ghana, just a social call. We met him at home, a very pleasant and impressive individual and proved to be a substantially more dynamic inspector general than his predecessor had been. For example, he I suppose was able to talk his way back into an office in the main State Department building which certainly restored a certain amount of prestige to the inspection function that they had lacked under his predecessor. He also did something which was, I think, very impressive in a substantive sense. The number two in the State Department, the deputy secretary or he may have been called the undersecretary then—I've forgotten when those terms were changed—anyway, he was the number two and was Elliot Richardson at the time under William Rogers who was the secretary of state. Richardson, as you know, had been I think governor of Massachusetts and subsequently became both, I think attorney general and secretary of defense. Richardson was a very pleasant, but very impressive individual in a substantive sense, very quiet in his manner but quite penetrating, I felt, on the basis of my brief experiences with him.

LC: Yes.

JM: Richardson was conducting broad reviews of policy toward individual countries at his level. The inspector general managed to get himself included in those policy reviews where he could raise the inspector's main substantive recommendations if they were appropriate and applicable, which meant that the inspection reports at least got some cognizance at senior levels in the department. So it seemed to me that in a substantive sense the inspection function had been raised very considerably in importance by this new inspector general. That's what I'll say about the two inspectors general and the effect that they had on the inspection function, Laura.

LC: Was McIlhaney a better-connected fellow or a better Foreign Service operator? To what do you attribute—

JM: I think it was probably the latter mainly, Laura. I think he was a more energetic, dynamic individual who would fight for things. He was very diplomatic, as a matter of fact, but I think he could be quite forceful if necessary.

LC: Moving the offices is very much a status issue, I'm sure. If I remember the State Department what floor you're on makes a difference and so on. Can you say where the offices were located when they were out of Foggy Bottom? Where exactly did they go?

JM: Well, the inspector general's office was located, as I said, about four or five blocks toward the White House, Laura, and toward the old State Department building, which was right next to the White House when I entered the service, near the World Bank and the IMF, which is of no particular significance at all. I've forgotten the exact address, but for anybody who knows Washington it was I would say about halfway between the State Department and the White House, but that didn't mean that it gained in prestige or lost in prestige.

LC: Right.

JM: Actually, the training function usually was carried out over in Virginia.

LC: Yes.

JM: I might mention, Laura, along this line something that I didn't raise when I was dealing with my assignment to the Vietnam Bureau in the AID agency from mid-'68 to the end of '69. The head of that bureau and his deputy had their offices in the main State Department building. However, all the rest of that huge bureaucracy in the Vietnam Bureau, which I discussed at length when we talked about it, was in an office over in Virginia. For our, I think, daily staff meetings the head of the bureau and his number two journeyed over into Virginia. So they wouldn't bring all those lower-ranking officials *en masse* to the State Department. That is indicative in a sense of—there just wasn't room in the State Department building, obviously, for all these people because as I indicated that bureau mushroomed about 450 people. So the head of the bureau always managed to retain an office in the State Department and therefore maintained a certain status, as you put it.

LC: When McIlhaney was able to move or obtain an office for himself I presume in the State Department building, did you know where it was, Joe?

JM: I think it was on the sixth floor—

LC: That's pretty good.

JM: Which is where the assistant secretaries at least of the geographic bureaus

had their offices. It was considered the more prestigious floor below the seventh floor on which the offices of the secretary and the number two were located. McIlhaney did manage not only to get back in the main State Department building but on the floor which made his prestige match that of the assistant secretaries.

LC: Yeah. That's pretty good work, actually.

JM: Exactly. As you put it, I think that shows that he was a good operator.

LC: Sure.

JM: I might just mention a bit of the future of McIlhaney. He was nominated subsequently as ambassador to Ethiopia, but in his physical it was found that I think because of a heart problem that he was unable to sustain that altitude. So I suppose the physical occurred before the Senate confirmed him, but I'm not sure of that. In any case, he never went to Ethiopia and died a few years later, I think probably from the same ailment, unfortunately. But he's an officer I look back upon with respect.

LC: Was he someone that you had come across?

JM: Well, as I said, only in that social visit that I made to Ghana, driving over from the capital of Togo to the capital of Ghana when I was inspecting. That was my only contact with him prior to the more extensive one, of course, when he became inspector general.

LC: Do you know had he had an Africa background for most of his service?

JM: I don't think his background was totally confined to Africa. I don't really know. I can't really answer that question accurately, Laura.

LC: Okay. Sure. Well, go ahead, Joe.

JM: Now I'd like to proceed with one more general point before I go abroad and that is that I decided early on that one of the chief things that I would emphasize in my inspection was the relationship of our operations abroad to our balance of payments problem in the United States. I think it's of interest that the balance of payments problem, which began to arise particularly in the 1960s under President Johnson who devoted considerable attention to that, reached a crescendo, an early crescendo at any rate, under President Nixon about I suppose a year-and-a-half after I had become an inspector. So I don't think I was mistaken in trying to emphasize this. By that crescendo I mean that in 1971, President Nixon made two very significant decisions. He took the

United States off the fixed exchange rate regime, which had governed the dollar since the Bretton Woods Agreements of 1944, those famous monetary and financial agreements which, among other things, brought into being the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. I think that's the official title. The United States had been under the fixed exchange rate status for the dollar since—well, they had been prior to that time and that continued after the war. So this was a major decision both nationally and internationally when Nixon took us off the fixed exchange rate and the dollar—the exchange rate for its conversion in to foreign currency floated up and down depending upon the market. Of course, that is still the status today and most of the major currencies in the world are floating. Interestingly enough, of course, the balance of payments problem—no, the other thing before I make that point, I would say the other decision that Nixon made was to impose a pretty substantial tariff on all imports. Well, you can imagine the shock abroad. This was aimed primarily at Japan, which was the country with which we were running the biggest balance of payments deficit at that time. The Japanese always called this the Nixon *shokku*, a shock in other words. S-H-O-K-K-U in Japanese. That was the word that was used. I don't know whether you've ever come across that.

LC: I don't think I have actually, no.

JM: The Japanese called it the *shokku*. In any case, there was strong reaction, of course, by all foreign countries to the fact that we suddenly levied a huge tariff on all imports into our country. There may have been some that were exempt, but it certainly was generally applicable. That part of the Nixon reaction to the balance of payments crisis was soon rescinded because of this strong reaction abroad. Of course, the interesting thing is, Laura, that the balance of payments problem has persisted and is still one of our main problems, what, forty years later and it's probably even more serious today than it was at that time.

LC: I think that's absolutely true. I agree with you. Yes.

JM: The emphasis today seems to be on the trade balance with China rather than the one with Japan because that is the bigger one, but it's interesting how that shift has occurred.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JM: We don't focus on Japan now. We tend to focus on China. Unfortunately, in my view, I don't think sufficient attention is given to the significance of this balance of payments problem as far as the future of the United States is concerned both in political—not only in economic terms, but in political and security terms as well because it means that an ever-increasing proportion of our national debt is being held by foreign countries rather than within the United States. That gives them a lever to use against us, particularly in any times of crisis with countries abroad. Much of the debt is now being held by the Chinese, of course, whose foreign exchange reserves of which have increased very substantially as you know.

LC: Yes. They're holding hundreds of billions of dollars.

JM: I feel this is a much more serious problem than the attention that's given to it. The attention is always focused on the budgetary deficit and to a much lesser degree on the balance of payments deficit to the extent that there is focus, particularly in the Congress and by the public on the balance payments deficit. The stress seems to be on trying to get the Chinese to detach their currency from being tied so closely to the dollar as it now is, and let it float, the expectation being that it would float upwards and that therefore we would buy less from China than we now do, thus reducing our big trade deficit with China. I think most of the experts feel that would not really resolve in any broad sense our balance of payments deficit even if the Chinese did permit the currency to float. It's something that I think would be useful. It's desirable, but alone I don't think I would agree with the experts, but I doubt that that would resolve very much of our problem. I have my own personal solution to the problem, but I have to admit before I outline it that it's probably not politically acceptable to the Congress and maybe to the public. Shall I explain what I—

LC: I hope you will, yes.

JM: Well, as you know, our federal taxation system is based essentially on taxation of income rather than expenditures. In other words we are today taxing income, savings and investment, rather than expenditures and consumption. That is reflected very clearly in what is a negative savings rate here in the United States at this time. That gets stressed from time to time, but it seems to me that no one really follows through with a proposed solution. What to me would be a better approach would be to shift from taxing

income, savings, and investment to taxing expenditures and consumption. The immediate objection to that is, "Oh, well, as soon as your start taxing consumption rather than income you greatly increase the burden on the average person." To some degree that is probably true, but it is just as easy in my view to adopt a progressive consumption tax as well as a progressive income tax, which we have today. In other words, items of lesser importance in consumption in terms of the use by the middle and lower-income people, you put a higher rate on consumption of luxury items, rated as high as you want. For one thing, I would levy a big tax on the sale of SUVs. I think they have done a great deal to increase not only our balance of payments deficit because of their consumption of fuel, but also they harm the environment, among other things. Now interestingly, in I think it was 1991, the first Bush administration, that is the father of the present one, pushed through an excise tax on luxuries for this very reason, to make a modest shift to taxing consumption. Congress, even though it was in Democratic hands, adopted that and it became law. But within a year or so there was so much objection in the state of Maine through the high excise tax on yachts that was adversely affecting employment in the shipyards of Maine that the Democratic majority leader in the Senate moved for a repeal of this consumption tax on luxuries and reversion to the old regime. So it was the Democrats who objected to a progressive luxury tax, a high tax on yachts among other things.

LC: So this was George Mitchell?

JM: That was George Mitchell, right. So, Laura, I'm not very hopeful that my big policy recommendation is likely to be adopted soon, but I still think that we're never really going to resolve this very serious balance of payments problem unless we do something about gradually shifting from income taxation to consumption taxation. Interestingly, of course, if you look at Europe's value-added tax which is in effect a consumption tax is very high throughout most, perhaps all of the countries of the European Union. That is very much a consumption tax. The problem in Europe is they instituted this tax without abolishing their income tax. So you tend to have high tax regimes in European Union states because they have both a big income and a very high consumption tax. Of course, that is a political danger in the U.S. If we start moving toward a consumption tax the income tax would be retained, the consumption tax would

be initiated and we'll have the worst of both houses.

LC: Potentially a massive recession here, too.

JM: That's right. That is the other aspect, of course, because if the consumption tax is really going to be effective in increasing the savings rate, which is essential to reducing our consumption and balance of payments deficit, it means that ordinary consumption items are going to have to be taxed at some rate because if one really examines, for example, the big balance of payments deficit with China, what we're importing from China is essentially low-price goods, which enter our economy as items highly consumed by the people of lesser income. Not all of those are essential, but a lot are. So you're not really going to reduce the balance of payments deficit to reasonable proportions unless you have some tax on consumption. I think if you look, for example, at what happens on the day after Thanksgiving when stores like Wal-Mart and others put on sale, not on what I consider absolutely essentials, but electronic goods, for example, the great rush by lower income consumers to buy what I consider really a luxury product, but maybe I'm too austere for this country.

LC: Well, one of the things that President Nixon I think did at the same time was to put a freeze on both wages and prices in 1971.

JM: Yes. I think Nixon did that. To me, price controls are usually a mistake in economic terms.

LC: Yes. I think so.

JM: They can't be maintained forever. When they're lifted your prices go up more than they would otherwise. We had this, of course, during World War II. We had rigid price controls, somewhat lesser control over wages, but when they were lifted after the war in 1946, inflation zoomed ahead because they had been lifted and as a matter of fact the Democrats lost control of the Congress, which they had been holding substantially ever since 1930 and '32 in the 1946 Congressional election. Of course, I may be going back too far in history. I'm getting very old, Laura. So I look over a long period of actual experience.

LC: That, of course, is why it's so beneficial to speak with you and one of the reasons. I think you're quite right. Nixon intended this wage and price freeze as a stop-gap to prevent inflation. Some of this was linked back of course to our massive overseas

expenditures during the Vietnam conflict. I think his 1971 decisions, the ones to which you've pointed, were driven in part by the debasing of the dollar. I can't remember, was it forty-five dollars an ounce or something like that for the gold?

JM: You're talking about the gold thing.

LC: Yes.

JM: I can't remember exactly, Laura, whether gold was gradually freed. I think you're right. It probably was gradual. I think that started, didn't it start in '68?

LC: Yes. He had that plan right along, yes.

JM: It probably was a gradual freeing of the price and, of course, the gold market is free now of course.

LC: Right. I'm not in the gold market, but I wish I was.

JM: I don't think it's a very good investment myself. It doesn't yield any income. It certainly is a refuge in times of inflation, I agree, but I've never resorted to it either.

LC: Well, Joe, those changes certainly had an impact on the overseas posts that you would be visiting and your point—

JM: Let me outline, Laura, how I went about this.

LC: Yes, please.

JM: What I tried to do was to look one at the essentiality of maintaining a post at all. I'll give you an example shortly after I move into actual inspections abroad. One was does the United States need this post at all and second was to look at the personnel strength of each office that I inspected to see whether all of the Americans—well, not just the Americans, but the Foreign Service, nationals, and the local employees, because all of them represented a drain on our balance of payments to see whether they were essential. The third was to look at the functions being performed to see whether certain functions could be abandoned completely or hived off elsewhere, which of course went back to the second one of possibly reducing the number of personnel. Those were the three things I looked at in specific terms when applying my balance of payments criteria to my inspection function.

LC: Joe, was this something that you determined as you were going through the briefings and so on? Was it something that because of your experience in essentially

reducing personnel levels at AID and also trying to manage things in Laos?

JM: I think, Laura, it certainly wasn't something that was recommended to us during the briefings we received in Washington before we went out. I don't remember any official who briefed us, inspector general or otherwise, [who was] specifically recommending that we focus on this. I think this was a personal approach by me to the inspections I was conducting.

LC: It's very interesting because you also—

JM: I think the reason is what you just referred to, my experience in AID where I focused on money both in Laos and subsequently in my assignment to the Vietnam Bureau.

LC: Right. So this was something that had been an effective kind of principle of organization for your work in Laos, the issue of containing costs and making sure that value for dollar was delivered and similarly at AID.

JM: No. I can't say my colleagues in the State Department ever focused a great deal on this aspect of our operation.

LC: I think you're right. I think those people are over in Treasury for the most part, but it's fascinating that you had this strategy kind of going in. You had already determined that these were some of the things that you wanted to approach.

JM: Exactly. Now, Laura, I think I'm ready to move into my actual inspection assignment. Interestingly, the first major contacts with the inspector general was not really by me, but by Nonie because the inspector general telephoned the house expecting to find me. I wasn't there. So he talked to Nonie saying that he was proposing to assign me to an inspection team in Italy as my first inspection abroad. Nonie reacted so overwhelmingly enthusiastically that I don't think he ever discussed it with me that I recall. So that turned out to be my first inspection assignment abroad, was to Italy.

LC: Now was this Wilkins that called?

JM: Yeah. This was Wilkins.

LC: He had no chance with Nonie, I think. She probably made all the calls in that discussion.

JM: Well, Nonie and I had discussed between ourselves that after retirement—and we never really focused much on retirement—that we might like to spend a year in

Italy to become acquainted with that very interesting country historically. We had never really reached any decisions on it, but had mentioned it casually to each other. Nonie, I think, had remembered these conversations. So she reacted with great enthusiasm to the raising to the raising of the possibility by Inspector General Wilkins.

LC: Fabulous.

JM: Laura, then I want to raise two or three other personal problems that we faced immediately because of my assignment to a constantly traveling inspection function abroad, applying not just to me, but to any inspector and to a degree to Foreign Service personnel in general, decisions that most people in the United States who stay more or less fixed in their jobs and their residences never have to confront in their lives. The first problem that arose was two of our three children were already in private school. Penny was our oldest one and was a senior at Radcliffe that point, which I think had already been integrated with Harvard. It turned out that when she graduated in June of that same year she was in the first class of Radcliffe graduates who received a Harvard degree. So the schools were beginning to be integrated as you can see. So she was already fixed as far as her schooling was concerned. Our second one, Priscilla, was at the academy in Massachusetts where we had placed her during our last year in Laos and had continued her during our year-and-a-half in the States. She was also completing her high school that year, in June of that year. So those two, there were no immediate problems. But our third one, Anne, was in public high school in Virginia where we lived. We immediately, since we were proposing to have Nonie travel with me—and I'll say this that the State Department would not pay for the travel of inspectors' wives abroad. That always had to come out of the inspectors' pocket.

LC: Really? Dear.

JM: Since Nonie was so enthusiastic about Italy we immediately agreed that she would travel with me abroad, which meant that our youngest daughter could not continue in the public school in Virginia. The issue was what to do about her because this was in December, not even at the end of the semester, which usually ends in, what, January, end of January. Fortunately, the school to which Priscilla was going, which was Abbott Academy, which was the sister school of Andover Academy in Massachusetts, because Priscilla had made a very good impression there immediately agreed on an exceptional

basis to take Anne in the middle of the semester, which resolved our problem certainly in one way as to what to do with our youngest daughter. We were always very grateful to Abbott for that decision. Actually, our youngest daughter Anne was not happy in the public school in Virginia. I think I've indicated earlier that she was extremely happy when we were in Laos, both in school and with her social activities since there were lots of Lao boys who came to the house all the time. She was very busy socially. But when we came back to the States in the middle of 1968 and she entered the public school in Virginia, she encountered a couple of things. One, of course, was students in the schools in the United States tend to have gone there for quite a number of years and have their own cliques. She, having been extremely popular in Laos, found that she was shut out of these cliques when she entered.

LC: That's very tough for girls especially.

JM: It's very tough for a teenager.

LC: Yes. Mm-hmm.

JM: Therefore she became increasingly unhappy in that school and because of her unhappiness overate and gained weight, which led additionally to being shunned. So she was a pretty unhappy girl at that time and so was quite prepared herself to move to another school and particularly a school where her sister Priscilla was going.

LC: So for her this was actually not disruptive but quite good.

JM: Quite good, except it turned out she was not much happier in Abbott than she had been in Virginia because again she didn't prove to be—Priscilla was very popular and Anne was not.

LC: Less outgoing in general?

JM: Yeah. At that stage, yes. So that didn't turn out quite as well as we hoped. As a matter of fact, let me see. Anne had two years and a half to go in high school.

LC: Wow. That's tough. She was a sophomore then. That's hard.

JM: Yes, she was a sophomore. I think it was—let me stop, Laura, to think. Oh, it was a year later in the beginning of '71 when Nonie felt that Anne was so unhappy at Abbott and she would have been in schools anywhere at that point I think in the States, Nonie decided she should stay in the States for a few weeks instead of continuing to travel with me in order to try to help straighten her out in some way. Abbott provided a

room for Nonie for the six weeks she stayed there. So Abbott really bent over backwards in helping us. I'll mention now a third way in which Abbott took the same approach. After a year-and-a-half at Abbott—and I'm moving ahead in a sense here. This was the summer of 1971 when we had already bought land in Italy to build a house for our retirement. Nonie decided to stay there to supervise the construction of the house for a year while I was continuing to inspect, Anne was placed for the last year of high school in the University for Foreigners in Perugia in Italy. There it turned out she was much happier. She again became the focus of attention by boys. The school proved to be good academically. She very quickly learned Italian very well, far better than Nonie and I ever mastered after seventeen years of living in Italy. She was quite happy at that school for what amounted to her senior year of high school. Abbott was again very helpful. They gave her credit for that year provided she took one correspondence course, which I think was in English literature, which she did. She even got a high school degree from Abbott.

LC: That's pretty remarkable.

JM: Absolutely remarkable. I suppose a lot of that credit should go to Priscilla because she had been at Abbott for a year-and-a-half before Anne came, no, two-years-and-a-half I guess. That meant she'd made a very good record and a good impression there. Anyway, those are the woes of dealing with a child's education if one is suddenly assigned abroad, plus the teenage problems, which I think are often encountered by those in that age group in the U.S. and abroad.

LC: But they can certainly be exaggerated or made a lot worse with moving about too much. Yes, it is something that every foreign—

JM: I think the teen period—and I look back on my own—I think the teen period was probably in many ways the most difficult in life.

LC: I'm with you on that. I'm absolutely with you. Yes.

JM: Usually your peers at that point can be extremely cruel and have no sympathy whatsoever for your problems, whereas later in life people tend to be a little more tolerant and understanding.

LC: I think also at some point one just sort of sheds one's attention to these things and doesn't really care quite so much, but that's very, very difficult to do when you're a young person.

JM: That's right. Now I'm going on to a couple of other personal problems I think from a sudden assignment abroad. One was what to do with our house, which we owned and were living in in the Virginia suburbs of Washington. Actually, pretty quickly we advertised I don't think in the public newspaper. I think we advertised within the government community and very soon we had an Army major who was delighted to take over the house from us at the rental we wanted and was prepared to do so at the end of January when we were leaving to go abroad. So that problem was settled then very quickly. As it turned out we were never to live in that house again. We had owned it since 1955. It was the first house we owned. I don't know whether I ever described it to you, Laura, or not.

LC: I don't think you did. No.

JM: It was originally a barn that had been converted into a house when development in the '50s extended to that area about ten miles out of Washington in the Virginia suburbs. So in a way it was a very unique house in its layout. It had certain features including paneling into the living room, not the usual pine paneling, which we had in our dining room, but in the living room the paneling had been painted white and the paint had immediately been wiped off. So it had a sheen quite different from the normal paneling to which I think Americans were accustomed in their houses. It had a huge stone fireplace in the living room. It was a house on the side of a hill and was entered through the front door at its second level, not the lower level as is usual. It had an acre of ground. Actually, when we bought it in '55, Nonie and Penny were the ones who convinced me we should buy it. I thought it was a little bit over what I wanted to spend for my first house, but anyway, it was a house which delighted us during our earlier years. Actually, as we found out in renting it I would say most people who looked at it for rental loved it, but there were those who hated it. One woman I think who was a prospective tenant when we were trying to rent it made the nasty comment, "I wouldn't be found dead in this house." Nonie responded, "I wouldn't be found dead having you as a tenant in my house." (Laughs) Anyway, that shows you the differences in opinion over residences, which is quite normal I think, can occur. Anyway, we subsequently sold that house in early '73. So we never actually lived in it again. By that time Nonie no longer considered it her house because we'd had tenants in it so frequently when he had been

assigned abroad. Priscilla and Anne had no particular long associations with that house, but Penny and I sort of hated to see it go. I loved the place, the house and the acre of garden. Penny had spent quite formative years there from ages seven to eleven and then again from, oh, let's see. After we came back, from fourteen to seventeen and she was married in the garden of that house.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: So she and I had very good memories of it. I'll give you a little postscript on that house, Laura. I hope I'm not going into personal length too much.

LC: No. This is fascinating.

JM: Anyway, when we bought that house—this was after we had been abroad for nine years—I told Nonie I want to buy through the only real estate representative that I know because I don't have great confidence in the integrity of that profession. This lady I know I can trust. She was a widow of a Foreign Service officer who actually worked for a while after her husband's death. We had served with her in Switzerland. I got in touch with her when we arrived in Washington in '55 and found that she operated only in Virginia. Nonie and I had intended since I was a native Marylander to look for a place in the Maryland suburbs of Washington. So that switched us to Virginia. When we decided upon a house and were ready to draw up the contract of purchase she said, "Be sure that we put into that contract that the house has to be termite free." So we put that clause in and it was found on inspection that there were termites in the house. The previous owner had to spend four or five hundred dollars, which in mid-'55 was much more money than today, in having the house de-termited. Under the twenty-year contract that the previous owner had with the termite company we had annual inspections. So that house, after the de-termiting of it, remained termite free during the time we were there during all eighteen years we owned that house. However, after we sold that house our second daughter Priscilla some years later was driving past and saw that there was nothing left of the house except the big stone chimney, to which that fireplace in the living room was attached. Evidently some subsequent owners had not kept up the annual inspection for termiting. So the house was found to be riddled with termites and had to be torn down completely except for the stone chimney.

LC: That's terrible.

JM: Somebody suffered a terrible loss on that house subsequent to our sale.

LC: Well, that's a horrible story.

JM: We were very lucky to have put that clause in our contract of purchase.

LC: Well, and the other thing is it's quite remarkable that over the time that you owned it, much of which you were not actually there, the maintenance continued to be done residentially.

JM: We still insisted upon the annual inspection.

LC: Yes. Yes. That's pretty dreadful, actually, that the whole building had to go. That's terrible.

JM: Oh, and interestingly, Priscilla then—I think her little daughter was then about, oh, two years old or something. She and her husband and her daughter were driving in the car. When Priscilla saw this she burst into tears and the little daughter said, "Oh, don't worry, Mama. Daddy will buy you another one."

LC: That's a good attitude.

JM: Laura, the third personal thing which I'll mention is the question of disposition of automobiles. We had never been a two-car family until the mid-'60s when Nonie eventually decided that she should have a car, too. So we had two cars for about a year in '64 and '65 before we went to Laos. Then when we came back from Laos we immediately decided that we would have to have two cars. So we got a little Volkswagen bug. You probably remember what that car looks like.

LC: I do. Yes.

JM: The second, we got a small Opal station wagon, which was fire-engine red in color, very underpowered. It wouldn't go up hills very well as we found on one of the first long trips. We drove one or both of our kids to Massachusetts at the beginning of the school year. We scarcely got up the hill, but I always loved that car for some reason. I have no great affection for cars, no great attachment to them, but this one was in many ways my favorite car. When we got ready to go abroad as inspectors in the beginning of 1970 we sold the Volkswagen bug, which of course had an excellent resale value at that time and decided we would turn the little Opal station wagon over to Penny, our oldest daughter. By that time she was married, John. They were seniors at Harvard with the proviso that whenever we were back in the States, and I was due to come back twice a

year for a month or so, we would have the use of the station wagon. Actually, our oldest daughter's husband is such a good technical mechanical individual he kept that car running for many years until, I think in 1977, living in that snowy state of Michigan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, which you know so well, the whole bottom rusted out at one time. The whole bottom just fell out of the car so that he had to get rid of it.

LC: Oh, yeah. The engine lasts a lot longer than the rest of the car.

JM: Exactly, because of the salt you use on all the snow-laden highways in Michigan.

LC: It's terrible. That's right.

JM: Anyway, we managed to dispose of these three personal problems and after the month of January during which we had briefings by the inspector general and substantive briefings from the geographic bureaus, by that time we were ready to get to go to our first inspection in Italy. So I proceeded to—I flew from Washington to Rome, probably New York to Rome rather than Washington directly—I don't think there is any direct flights—in early February of 1970. Inspectors always travelled first to the embassy of the country where they were briefed for a day or two by the embassy before they went out to inspect the constituent post, the consular post, consulate's general and consulate. So I and the inspection team of which I was a part were briefed by the embassy. I might mention about the inspection team at that stage. Since the embassy there was a large one and we had a lot of constituent posts in Italy the inspection team consisted of four people instead of the more normal two, substantive inspector and consular administrative inspector. We were four there. The senior inspector was a fellow by the name of Woodruff Wallner, Woody Wallner. He was a senior Foreign Service Class One officer and had been inspector longer than I. So he had been designated as the head of our team. I was subordinate to him as the other substantive inspectors. We had two administrative inspectors. I ought to say something about him, I think, Laura, too. He never impressed me very greatly. He was a very pleasant individual, but he never impressed me very greatly in a substantive sense. He had been deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of International Organizations, which the principal one of course is the UN, for a while and had also been the deputy chief of mission in Paris. So he'd had some pretty significant substantive assignments before he became inspector, but he was the kind of Foreign

Service officer which I tend to deplore, sort of superficial in his substantive approach. Well, I'll put it even more strongly, supercilious in his substantive approach. For example, when we had our initial meeting in the embassy in Rome with the ambassador, Wallner said deprecatingly, "Oh, we have to do our thing as inspectors," almost apologizing to the ambassador for the fact that we were there and I thought in effect downgrading the whole inspection function, which I think he was. He thought it was something that we had to do to meet the law, but not something very important substantively. I didn't like that approach to what we were doing, as you can understand. I was always pretty interested in the substance of any activity I undertook in the Foreign Service. While he was likeable enough personally and I served with him for the first five months of my inspection duty from February through June, I never had a great deal of respect for him. We always got along because I knew he was the boss. At the embassy in Rome he handled the overall direction and management of the embassy, inspection as well as political section. I inspected the economic section. The other two inspectors did the consular and administrative functions. So I never came away with very, very great enthusiasm for him. On the other hand, Graham Martin was our ambassador in Italy and quite a different individual, also a Foreign Service officer, which is somewhat unusual because the ambassador to Italy is often a political appointee. But Graham Martin was held in very high esteem by the State Department and had already served as ambassador to Thailand. As a matter of fact, my first contact with him was when I was director of the office of East Asian Regional Affairs and he was on his way to Bangkok as ambassador. He came in for a briefing about SEATO, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, because the Washington handling of that function of the State Department fell within the purview of the office I was heading. Graham Martin had a very superficially quiet approach, but was always very penetrating in the questions he asked and the views he took. Interestingly enough, he had risen through the administrative cone in the Foreign Service, which was rather unusual at that time and may still be, but he had proved to be a very effective substantive officer once he was named ambassador. For example, in Thailand he was there, as I indicated, starting in '64 or '65. I've forgotten exactly which. Thailand, of course, was very important to us during the Vietnam War because we established quite a number of military bases in Thailand, particularly for the Air Force

because of over-flights from ships in the Pacific or bases in Vietnam over North Vietnam and over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Planes often flew into Thailand and spent a great deal of time there. So Thailand was very useful to us at that stage and was wanting some increased military aid from us. McNamara, the secretary of defense, was strongly opposing this and, of course, he was a very significant cabinet officer, very strong himself. But Graham Martin did a very unusual thing for an ambassador, particularly a career ambassador. He took the fight to President Johnson himself and won it. Johnson reversed McNamara and gave Martin what he was asking for, which was an extremely courageous move on the part of a Foreign Service ambassador. I very highly respected him for it. Then when I was director of the AID mission in Laos I discussed—am I going too long, Laura?

LC: Oh, absolutely not. Keep going if you would.

JM: Well, I'll go through this aspect.

LC: Sure. Sure.

JM: When I was ambassador to Laos, not ambassador excuse me. When I was the head of the AID mission in Laos during the last year I was there among the fights in which I engaged which I discussed with you before was the one over the transport costs for all of our AID material and supplies, which had to come through Thailand. The Thai Express Transport Bureau, which was run by a group of generals, active and retired, handled all transportation, at least what went to Laos. I don't know how much they handled within Thailand itself. I felt they were gouging us and I engaged in a big fight. As you will recall, there were cables hot and heavy flying between Bangkok and ourselves over this. I knew at the time that it was the head of the economic section in the embassy in Bangkok who was primarily drafting these cables and who seemed to be primarily involved in trying to deflect what I was attempting to do to reduce our costs for this transport, but I assumed that Martin was right behind him and therefore was as critical and antagonistic toward me as I knew the head of the economic section was. I think that I indicated that some of those cables were really, really very virulent that were flying back and—of course, Washington got its copies and they were disturbed, too. But anyway, when I arrived in Italy as ambassador I didn't expect to get any favorable treatment from Graham Martin at all because of this experience. I had never spoken to

him personally since the time he was briefed much earlier by me when he was on his way to Bangkok as ambassador about SEATO. Anyway, Martin never raised this at all. He never gave any indication during the time I inspected there that this was important to him one way or the other. He was a guy who always held his cards very close to his chest and he certainly did in this case. As a matter of fact, one of the things that Wallner, the head of our team, told me during the inspection of the embassy was that Martin as ambassador and his number two, Wells Stabler, the deputy chief of mission, each complained privately to Wallner that the other didn't keep him informed as to what was going on. I can well see this on the part of Graham Martin because I knew he played his cards close to his chest, but he held the same view about his number two, Wells Stabler, which sort of amused me. Anyway, I got no reflection during the whole inspection of what Martin's views were one way or the other toward me, but later after I was named ambassador to Madagascar in 1972, and I passed through Italy en route because we had finished our house by that time for retirement purposes. I think Nonie was still there so I wanted to see her, I made a courtesy call on Graham Martin since I was now an ambassador. Interestingly, he warmed up and opened up very considerably. He expressed his admiration for Nonie because he certainly kept his hand on things and he knew she had spent a year in Italy alone supervising the construction of our house. He expressed his admiration for her for doing it. He had also bought property in Italy, but I don't think his wife ever spent much time there alone. So I guess that personal factor may have influenced his judgment with respect to Nonie. I think also he was quite aware that Nonie never asked for embassy intervention in anything during our construction of that house. I think he also made some mention of my service in Laos as a director and the fact that he thought I had done very well as director of the AID mission in Laos. I can't assert that positively, but I have some recollection he did. Anyway, Laura, that was my experience with Graham Martin. I might, before we hang up here, simply add a footnote to Graham Martin's future. He was named as our last ambassador to South Vietnam in either '72 or '73 by President Nixon and was there unfortunately when the very humiliating end came to our association with South Vietnam when they were all over the headlines and newspapers and the TV broadcasts in the United States was this pathetic scene of the last Americans being evacuated from the helicopters on the roof of the

embassy in Saigon. Martin got on that last helicopter himself. He stayed until the very end, which I thought was very admirable, too, on his part, but he was subjected to extremely heavy criticism in Washington and publicly in the United States over the handling of the end of our defeat in Vietnam, the humiliation at the end of it because he hadn't gotten, particularly because he hadn't gotten enough sufficient number of Vietnamese who would work out of Vietnam. He should have acted much earlier. But I've always felt that that was a damned-if-you-do-and-damned-if-you-don't decision that Martin had to make. He was hoping until the very end that the South Vietnamese government would hold on. He knew that if he started evacuating South Vietnamese early in anticipation of the ultimate defeat that he would simply hasten that defeat. So he was in a position where he couldn't win whichever decision he made. Martin, I'm sure, expected a big congressional investigation over his handling of that. The final thing that happened to him after he had retired to North Carolina, the state of which he was a native, he was stopped one time by police in town with a footlocker of classified documents in the trunk of his car, which he had taken from Vietnam. I'm sure to make sure that if there was a congressional investigation he would have his files to refer to in defending himself because it could have been a very nasty thing. He was ridiculed in the press for this and, of course, attacked for having these classified documents privately in his car, but I can see why he did it and have a pretty thorough understanding. So I, as you can see, have retained a very high regard for Graham Martin, but not for Woodruff Wallner. So there you are, Laura. I think we can wind up on that today.

Interview with Joseph Mendenhall
Session [57] of [57]
Date: July 27, 2007

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive. I am continuing the oral history interview with Amb. Joe Mendenhall. Today is the twentieth of July 2007, our fifty-seventh session as I remarked to the ambassador earlier. I am in Lubbock. The ambassador speaks from his home in Nevada. Hello, Joe.

Joseph Mendenhall: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thanks for your time today. Joe, it looks as if this may be the last in the series of our interviews.

JM: Yes, I completely understand, Laura. I would like to say I think this is a very appropriate juncture in our long series of interviews to bring them to an end because of career developments on your side and because we've reached the stage in the interviews which really terminate my long association with Southeast Asia, which was the central focus of U.S. foreign policy during all of the 1960s. During that period, as you know, I had assignments to both Vietnam and Laos and also two assignments in Washington dealing primarily with that area. So I was closely associated with the central point in U.S. foreign policy during that whole decade. There was a possibility or I think even a probability at one stage that when I left my last assignment that we have discussed, the last Southeast Asian assignment that we had discussed, that is the one that I was in charge of the Vietnam Bureau in the Agency for International Development, the AID agency, that I would be called back into Southeast Asia, but it didn't work out that way. I will briefly summarize what happened in that respect.

LC: Sure.

JM: At the beginning of 1970 when I had left that job in the AID agency and entered the Inspection Corps of the Foreign Service there was a possibility, and as I say even probability, that I would be named the head of the CORDS program in Vietnam, which was one of the three ambassadorial positions in the country, as well as one of the two deputy commanders to the commander-in-chief of the military forces, that is, the deputy in charge of pacification, which is what the CORDS program was all about, pacification or counter-insurgency, which I think may be a term more widely understood

today because of the Iraqi experience.

LC: Sure.

JM: The reason that seemed to be something that might well develop was that Bill Colby, who was the head of that program and had been head of that program since the fall of 1968, seemed to face the prospect of an imminent return to Washington because of health problems relating to his oldest child. She was an epileptic and had taken a very serious turn for the worse. The general expectation in Washington is that Colby would come back in order to be with the family and take on a senior assignment in CIA very shortly. As it turned out, Colby actually stayed on in Vietnam until the summer of 1971. So it didn't turn out to be really so imminent as it appeared at the beginning of 1970. I was being pushed by Bill Sullivan as the successor to Colby. Bill had the nominal title of deputy assistant secretary in the Far Eastern Bureau, but he was really in charge of Vietnam policy and reported to the secretary of state and had direct contact with Kissinger, the national security advisor. Bill was pushing me very strongly for this position. In fact, he telephoned the inspector general when I was assigned to the Inspection Corps and said, "Don't expect to keep Joe Mendenhall very long," which indicated that he thought that this assignment was going to transpire very shortly, too.

LC: Yes.

JM: What happened was as I said Colby—I want to add also that in the spring of '71 and in the summer of '71 our deputy ambassador in Vietnam who had one of the three ambassadorial titles as well as Ambassador Bunker himself, both got in touch with me to look me over, I think, for this job. So that also indicated that things seemed to be moving in that direction, although with some delay from the beginning of 1970. But what actually happened was that when Colby left, the administration was under congressional and media pressure and so rapidly winding down the U.S. military position in Vietnam that the decision was eventually taking apparently in the summer of '71 and I assume by the president himself not to send any successor to Colby out because of the rapid draw-down of U.S. military participation in the conflict. So that as far as I was concerned, though I was disappointed at the time the way things turned out, if I had been named to that position all I would have been doing would have been winding it down. So I'm just as glad from that standpoint that though I wanted it very much in '70 and still in

the summer of ’71 it’s just as well that it did not occur. So I did not return to the vortex of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia as I anticipated at the beginning of 1970. Okay, Laura, I think then we can move on to my two assignments. First was the assignment to the Inspection Corps. Excuse me, Laura, I’ve got to clear my throat.

LC: Sure.

JM: I think I described the nature of that assignment during our last interview.

LC: You did.

JM: I served as an inspector of embassies and consular posts abroad from the beginning of 1970 until September 1972. In other words, two years and eight months. The places where I did inspect and I’ll make a rapid summary of that, Laura, for the record here.

LC: Okay. Yes.

JM: The first half of 1970, I was in Italy and Great Britain. We were actually four inspectors, two senior inspectors and two administrative inspectors in those countries where we had large embassies. Then in the second half of 1970, I went to Africa as the head of a two-man inspection team inspecting first in the Portuguese possessions in Angola and Mozambique. Portugal still controlled those [possessions] at that point. I passed through Lisbon en route to inspecting the two consulate generals in those two areas. Then on to our two embassies in the Indian Ocean in Madagascar and Mauritius, then back to the heart of the continent of Africa to inspect in Nigeria both the two consular posts in Ibadan in the west and Kaduna in the north-central part of the country, then, of course, spending the most of my time in Lagos, the capital. Then after winding up there, three smaller countries in Africa, Dahomey, now called Benin, Togo, and Chad. So that was my African experience during the second half of 1970. In 1971 during the first half I went back to Switzerland where I had served from 1952 to 1955. I inspected not only the embassy in Bern and the consulate general in Zurich, but also the U.S. mission to the UN agencies in Geneva, which is a very different kind of mission from a normal embassy operation, and had to be approached quite differently from my standpoint, quite interesting and rewarding as far as I was concerned. Then after Switzerland I went to Yugoslavia for the latter part of the first half of the year. In the second half of 1971, I inspected first in Greece, then in Morocco in North Africa and then

on to the very underdeveloped country of Mauritania and finally wound up that year in Jamaica for about a month. Then in 1972, I inspected first in Iran and then the very interesting countries of Yemen and Sudan, each for about a week, and then wound up in Spain. Then in the second half of the year I started with Germany and I did not complete that inspection of Germany because I was summoned back to Washington after being nominated by President Nixon as the ambassador to Madagascar. So that, Laura, shows the extent of my inspection service.

LC: Go ahead, Joe.

JM: Laura, you raised the question about Soviet influence in the countries of Africa which I visited. In Angola and Mozambique there was no—sorry, I don't know why I'm having so much trouble this morning. In those two countries there was no sign as yet of Soviet activity. I guess their activities were already underway in Mozambique. I don't recall. They certainly were in Angola, but there was no indication of any widespread Soviet attempt to influence those countries. That came essentially, I think, after those countries acquired independence a bit later in the 1970s. In the other African countries that I inspected, no, I can't say that there was great attempt on the part of the Soviets at that stage to influence what was happening in Africa. I was discussing Ethiopia from a standpoint of Soviet influence. I don't think it began to occur there until toward the middle of the 1970s, which as I recall now was the time when the revolution took place.

LC: Yes.

JM: What I'm talking about of course relates to black Africa south of the Sahara. In the Arab countries in northern Africa, of course, the Soviets had been quite active for at least a decade-and-a-half or a couple of decades, particularly in Egypt where they had worked very hard to try to influence Nasser as you recall.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JM: That was the North African country where they exerted the most influence. But in black Africa the Cold War really became much more significant later during that decade and then on into the 1980s. So I didn't really encounter that to any great extent during my inspection.

LC: How would you categorize U.S. assistance efforts in mainland Africa south

of the Sahara at this time?

JM: Well again at that stage we were not heavily involved as far as AID programs were concerned in black Africa. That also came later. I think it's beginning to become a more important focus of our efforts at the present time because of our need of oil from Africa and also because of the possibility that Muslim terrorism may spread to black African countries. But at that stage North Africa, again that was quite different. We were already heavily involved in AID programs there.

LC: You mentioned that you went to Yugoslavia as well. Could you get a sense at that time of its position between in the kind of non-aligned movement as it was called at that time? How close were U.S. relations with Yugoslavia in 1971?

JM: Well, I think they were still much as they had been for, I guess, what was let's say a couple of decades. Close, not really because Tito valued his position as one of the principal so called non-aligned figures in the world. So obviously they were much better than they had been during the years immediately after World War II when we were often at swords points with Tito's Yugoslavia.

LC: Absolutely. Yes. Absolutely.

JM: When he made his big break with Stalin's Russia in 1948, from there on the situation was different. It wasn't ideal from our standpoint, but it certainly was an improvement over what it had been. Interestingly, Laura, in view of what happened after Tito's death and Yugoslavia began to break up, I found during my brief stay in Zagreb, the principal city in Croatia, I was at a cocktail party talking to a Croat and I immediately ran into the bitter anti-Serb feelings on the part of the Croats. It came out immediately at the first cocktail party I attended in Croatia. So I came away with a very thorough awareness of the enmity between those two countries who are really very closely related ethnically, but very far apart from a religious standpoint, one being Roman Catholic and the other Greek Orthodox. Of course, although the enmity seems to have been put aside to a considerable degree at present it certainly was a principal factor in the wars in Yugoslavia dining the 1990s. But I certainly did encounter that immediately.

LC: Well, you're—

JM: I also will say—this is also an aside, Laura—when I was in Belgrade I was warned by the embassy that all telephone conversations were listened into by the

Yugoslav secret police and that same of the Americans occasionally said when there was too much interference, let's say from the static you and I are having, "Get off the telephone, you secret police!" Yugoslavia under Tito was certainly not a free country by any means.

LC: Right. Yes.

JM: Now, Laura, just let me discuss one or two other points about my inspection.

LC: Very good.

JM: As inspectors, of course, we looked at the operations of the embassy in great detail. We generally found that all of our embassies and consular posts were operating very effectively or rather effectively so that there was no great grounds for criticism there. The only one where we ran into real problems was a consular post in the UK. I won't mention which one. We had slated just three days to inspect that post. We had been given no forewarning either by the State Department or the embassy in London where we had met with the officials dealing with the UK before we went to this post. No indication that there were problems. The very first full day that we were at this post, problems, complaints began to arise, strong complaints, against the consul general, both from the staff in the consulate. That night we went to a cocktail party from the people of the country themselves. I was a pretty brand new inspector at that time. I had just inspected in Italy for a couple of months. I was amazed how quickly the place where there were real problems, those problems emerged when the inspector was there. They were immediately brought to the inspector's attention not only by staff, but also by the people of the country concerned. That was a real eye-opener for me. The consul general in that case very shortly retired from the service. So that was the one exception to the fact that we found that generally things were running well in our posts abroad. I also, I think I've indicated earlier that as inspectors at that time we had to write efficiency reports on every American on the staff of each post we visited, both officers and the file clerks, code room personnel, and secretaries. This, of course, was an enormous job and considered by the people who were being rated as very important because they knew that inspector's efficiency reports were generally given more weight in promotion boards in Washington than the reports of their superiors. That, plus the fact that we had to show these efficiency reports to everybody we inspected before we finalized, them meant that it

was a nerve-wracking experience. It took a lot out of a conscientious inspector, as I tried to be, because we had to be prepared to justify every statement that even possibly implied any criticism of the individual to that individual when showing the report to him and discussing it with him. But I tried to be fair both to the individual and to the U.S. government. I was gratified to be told by a friend of mine who was in personnel at that time that when the officials in personnel were filling assignments the first question they would ask was there a Mendenhall efficiency report in the file of that individual. So that indicated that my efficiency reports were considered fair and useful at that same time by personnel in Washington. I'll also wind up, Laura, on my inspection discussion by saying that I was gratified by the last efficiency report I personally received from the inspector general in the summer of 1972, in which he stated I was the best inspector he had. Now maybe I'm not being very modest by putting this into the record of my talk with you.

LC: I think that's fine. Joe, who was the inspector general at that point?

JM: At that point it was McIlhaney, who actually whom I respected considerably more as inspector general than the one who was inspector general at the time I first became an inspector. McIlhaney had been ambassador to Ghana where I met him very briefly when I was inspector. Nonie and I drove over one day from, let's see, I think it was from—I don't know whether it was from Togo—I've forgotten which, but one of those—to Accra, the capital of Ghana, simply to call on the ambassador because the country was next door. It was a chance to see a bit of the countryside of the country in which I was inspecting as well as Ghana. So I just had that brief experience with him before. He increased the importance of the Inspection Corps. I think I discussed this the last time.

LC: Yes. You did actually. That's right.

JM: But to a much greater extent than the previous inspector general had. So I attached real importance to the statement he said about me personally, modest as I may be for bringing it up.

LC: Well, Joe, from the point of view of what happened with your nomination, it might be useful too if you can say a few words about your trip to Madagascar in 1970.

JM: I had no indication whatsoever that I would ever be the ambassador.

LC: Sure. Right. But how did you find the place?

JM: Well, I found more, of course, during my stay as ambassador, but it was I think pretty clear from the outset that Madagascar was a country that was retrogressing. When I first went there in 1970 they'd been independent for about ten years. It was clearly a country that was retrogressing rather than progressing after it acquired independence. I'll go into this a bit more when I was ambassador.

LC: Sure.

JM: I also will say that the ambassador at that point was Anthony Marshall. He was a wealthy Republican who had contributed well to Nixon and was nominated as ambassador to Madagascar for that reason. He was quite an able individual. I'm not implying that he wasn't. Later he became ambassador to Kenya. So I became acquainted with him and his wife during that time. However, in I guess it was early I think 1971, he and several members of his staff were declared *persona non grata* by the Madagascar government. He had to leave Madagascar along with those members of his staff because the French ambassador had thrown a bee into the ear of the president of Madagascar saying the Americans were going to try to get him thrown out. So the president had our ambassador declared *persona non grata*. There was nothing to that whatsoever. It was purely a vendetta on the part of the French. Whether it was mounted without Paris's knowledge or just by the French ambassador himself or whether it was with the knowledge of Paris, I have no way of knowing. Then for about I guess a year or more we had no ambassador in Madagascar. Marshall subsequently, as I indicated, went to Kenya as ambassador. I mentioned his name, Laura, because you probably have been reading in the press recently about the problems of Mrs. Astor, 105-years-old, and her problems that her son was alleged by his son to be misusing her resources.

LC: Yes. Uh-huh.

JM: That son is Anthony Marshall, just for your interest of the man who was ambassador to Madagascar.

LC: Oh, is that right?

JM: I thought that would be quite interesting.

LC: That is very interesting.

JM: It's a good point.

LC: I had no idea. Well, that's very interesting. You don't have any further sense of what the French may have, or whichever French official was involved in this may have had in mind?

JM: No. Other than the ambassador himself, I do not.

LC: Interesting.

JM: I will say that when I was in Madagascar, I had very good relations with the man who was ambassador for France most of the time I was there. In fact, he invited—the night of the presidential election in France in I guess it would have been probably '73 when Giscard d'Estaing was running against Mitterrand—Giscard d'Estaing, of course, was the conservative nominee and Mitterrand was the socialist—and the ambassador the night of the election before the returns had come in called and invited Nonie and me to come over and sit with him and his wife and listen to the return. He obviously was extremely pleased that Giscard won that election. So that indicates that our personal relations were quite good.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: I never had any problem with him professionally at all. We had very fine interpersonal relations. I'll mention one little thing that may interest you on this point, too. For some reason European and American women, after they had been in Madagascar for about a year, began to feel some kind of physical malaise and nobody knew quite why. Well, the wife of the French ambassador and Nonie both began to feel this way at the same time. When she was discussing with Nonie she said, "Wouldn't it be amazing if the wives of the French and American ambassadors both became pregnant at the same time?" The symptoms, as far as the ladies were concerned, were similar to those in the early months of pregnancy.

LC: No kidding?

JM: Yeah, but it's something that as far as both of them were concerned I think passed relatively quickly but no one knew quite why.

LC: That's very odd.

JM: You're the director of women's studies.

LC: That's right. I should look into this.

JM: This is an issue for you.

LC: That's right. I should look into this as a matter of importance.

JM: Right. Okay, shall we proceed with—

LC: Very good. Yes.

JM: In June of 1972 when I was inspecting in Madrid I got a telegram from the director general of the Foreign Service, who was the head of personnel among other things, saying that the State Department was considering proposing me to the White House for nomination as ambassador. Was there any reason why I should not be named to that position? So I cabled back, "No." So that was the first inkling I got that this was being dangled as a possibility, but I was also told—of course I didn't need this one—don't discuss this with anybody because this is the very earliest stages.

LC: Sure.

JM: I don't know whether Nixon was the same way as Johnson. I think I indicated earlier that when Johnson was considering a nomination if the fact that it was being considered leaked out that probably meant that Johnson would stop considering it from then on. He wanted everything to be announced by the White House as far as his appointments were concerned. In any case, I told Nonie, but I didn't tell anybody else. Then I think the nomination came—oh, I know. The nomination came through in August of '72. Nonie was the first one to learn about it rather than myself because I had gone briefly down to Italy to inspect the political advisor to a NATO headquarters in Naples. Nonie and I had just finished building our retirement home in Italy. I stopped by there briefly and picked up Nonie and the girls, but we had a little Volkswagen bug. So Nonie had to go to Frankfurt by train from Italy and I drove the bug with the two girls. Nonie reached Frankfurt before I did and was greeted at the train by the consul general in Frankfurt, the American consul general, with the news that I had been nominated by Nixon as ambassador. So Nonie greeted me when I arrived in Frankfurt with the same news. That's how I got it.

LC: That's a great story. So you and the girls were in the bug?

JM: We were in the bug, right. It took us longer, of course, than the train.

LC: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. Was it clear that the nomination was for Madagascar at this point?

JM: Oh, yes. Yes, it's always for a specific country, not in general.

LC: Yeah.

JM: Then I had to continue my inspections until I was summoned back to Washington for appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for confirmation. That summons came on the first of September. I think I met with that committee during that first, sometime during that first week in Washington. There approved to be no problems. Actually I think there two senators in the committee who were present. I think five of us were up for consideration by the committee including an admiral who had been nominated as ambassador to Spain. He was the only one who received some focus from the committee. Fulbright was chairman and he sort of put the admiral through a grilling because Fulbright did not really go along with our reconciliation with Franco's Spain. Fulbright left immediately after that and Senator Sparkman of Alabama, who you may remember was the Democratic nominee for vice president with Stevenson in 1952, took over as the acting chairman. He and I think Senator Aiken, Republican, were the only two present. Actually another senator whom I knew from Delaware, Senator Boggs, had gotten in touch with Senator Aiken before I appeared at the committee and told him that I had a son-in-law from Vermont. So the only thing that Aiken brought up was the fact I had a son-in-law from the state of Vermont. So my nomination slipped through the committee. Rather shortly after that the confirmation by the full Senate came through without any problems. So by early October I was on my way to Madagascar as the American ambassador to that country. I was pleased, of course, because of the prestige attached to an ambassadorial position.

LC: Absolutely.

JM: After all, becoming an ambassador is the aim of every Foreign Service officer worth his salt. I finally had achieved it in my career.

LC: Well, you must have felt great, Joe, because that opportunity had kind of gone past you on a couple of previous occasions that you've mentioned for political reasons that really didn't have much to do with you.

JM: Right.

LC: I'm sure Nonie must have been very pleased also.

JM: Well, she was. She would have preferred a European country, as I would have, too.

LC: Indeed.

JM: Actually, I met with Dave Newsom who was the assistant secretary for African Affairs after my nomination. One of the things he said to me is, "Now, you have had very important assignments in your career where you've had to work extremely hard. Now you're going to a position where you have to learn how not to work," which was largely true because the U.S. interests in Madagascar—this is the other side of the coin of that ambassadorial nomination. U.S. interests in that country were extremely limited and I, of course, had been associated with the center of U.S. foreign policy for so many years. In that sense it was a [let] down. We had only a couple of concrete interests. We had a NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) space tracking station in Madagascar, which had been there for a number of years. Of course, we wanted to retain that. The other interest was the fact that U.S. naval vessels in the Indian Ocean who were under the command of a U.S. naval officer stationed in Bahrain liked from time to time to make port calls throughout the area, including Madagascar, so as to give the naval personnel a chance to get on shore for a couple of days. That, of course, we tried to protect that limited interest also. As far as trade was concerned, Madagascar was so underdeveloped that there was not much chance for increasing U.S. exports to the country. As far as investments were concerned, better not to. I remember I had a call from the, I think, Banker's Trust Company in New York. A representative came in to discuss with me an investment that his bank was considering making. My answer to him was one word: don't. I think back he must have proceeded to do so and lost on it. So U.S. interests, as you see, were extremely minimal as far as Madagascar was concerned. I did make an effort to influence the foreign minister, a man by the name of Ratsiraka. Now I'm going to spell that, R-A-T-S-I-R-A-K-A. The language was called Malagasy. Usually one or more letters at the end disappear when you pronounce the name. So it's pronounced Rat-seer-ik. Ratsiraka was a foreign minister. I'm going to put this in context. Probably the most interesting thing of all about Madagascar is that it is the only country I know in which the brown race and the black race are in political competition and rivalry. I'll bring out how important that was. I know of no other country. The brown people had come from Southeast Asia, of Polynesian background similar to Malayans, Filipinos, and Indonesians. They came from Southeast Asia all the way to

Madagascar in the western part of the Indian Ocean. Nobody has any idea when or how. They must have come by boat, of course, but no one has any idea when. The blacks, of course, had come from the continent of Africa to the island. Certainly in the 1800s the browns were dominant in Madagascar. There was a monarchy. They held the blacks as slaves. So there was a long tradition of enmity between the two peoples. The French took over, as I recall, in Madagascar in about 1880. I'm not sure. I think they retained the monarchy for a while. I've forgotten on Madagascar, now a lot of it. I think they retained it. Anyway, France held on to Madagascar from about 1880 until about 1960 when they gave the country independence. This rivalry between the two—let me put that into more focus. The blacks by that time had become a greater share of the population than the browns. So when an election was held for president, when Madagascar became independent, a black by the name of Tsiranana—and there they dropped, I think, three or four letters from the end of his name—became the president. He was president from 1960 until a student riot in Tananarive, the capital of Madagascar, now called Antananarivo, but Tananariv when we were there. A student riot in 1972 caused the ouster of this man. The principal figure in the Malagasy army took over as the head of state. His name is Ramanantsoa. He was a major general, but he was the ranking figure in the army. He was a brown. There appeared to be no great problem in the relations between the browns and the blacks during most of my stay. This student riot took place rather shortly before I came to Madagascar as ambassador.

LC: What was the cause of it, Joe?

JM: Well, the country was retrogressing so much the students wanted a change of government.

LC: Economic upset?

JM: Yeah. Everybody was getting poor. It was principally motivated by economic reasons. But as I say, there was no real manifestation that one could see of this enmity between the browns and the blacks during most of the time I was there. Probably the most dynamic figure in the country was the foreign minister whom I mentioned, Ratsiraka. It was clear from the outset that he was a radical. I tried to influence him to look economically to South Korea as a model for development by an underdeveloped country. That's when South Korea had begun to emerge into real development in an

economic sense, but he looked much more to what I called at that stage three other failures economically, Algeria, Tanzania, and North Korea. My efforts did not succeed with him obviously at all. I mention this as background because in early February of 1975, Ramanantsoa suddenly resigned as the head of state. Everybody was quite surprised and he named as his successor the minister of interior, a brown by the name of Ratsimandrava. I say a brown because his complexion was really very dark, but he was actually of the brown race and not of the black race. Six days after Ratsimandrava became prime minister, I got a call about six o'clock in the morning awakening me by a Malagasy contact saying, "Do you know that the prime minister has just been assassinated by members of the army?" As it turns out, the black members of the armed forces had risen in revolt against this brown prime minister. For twenty-four hours or more there was certainly substantial fighting between the browns and the blacks in the armed forces over what had happened.

LC: Was the fighting in the capital of Tananarive?

JM: No, just in Tananarive. It turned out that our residence, the ambassadorial residence, was located in the valley between the two major opposing military camps.

LC: Oh, boy.

JM: So they fired all day the first day over the top of our residence at each other. We found lots of shells in the garden. What I did as soon as I got this telephone call, as I would have done in any country, I went to the embassy in order to report to Washington on what was happening. Nonie remained behind at the residence. She had had plenty of experience with coups and coup attempts in Vietnam and Laos.

LC: Yes.

JM: So she knew that the principal thing that you do under those circumstances is to keep your head down by getting into the most protected part of your house. So she took the servants—I think we had five servants—and went down to a storeroom underneath the house together with a young French lady and her baby—she was a neighbor and we hadn't known her, but she came over seeking protection in our residence when the firing began. So Nonie and the servants and this lady spent all day in our storeroom. We had a number of stores there that we had imported to Madagascar, including cakes and candies. So Nonie fed them to the servants all day long down in the storeroom.

LC: Now you didn't have any of the children with you at this point, did you?

JM: No. We had none of the children.

LC: Right. Okay.

JM: Oh, I had three emergency radios between the embassy and the residence, just for this sort of emergency. As luck would have it, all three went on the blink immediately. So I was totally out of contact with Nonie, but I said I knew she had had these experiences before and knew pretty well how to take care of herself. It turned out at nightfall the firing stopped and Nonie decided it was so uncomfortable down there that she and the servants would all go upstairs. They put all kinds of pillows and things in the hall between the rooms as the best protected place upstairs. They all slept on the floor on these pillows, Nonie and the servants and the French lady and her baby.

LC: No kidding.

JM: Yeah. The next morning my defense attaché, who was a lieutenant colonel from the Air Force, came to me and said, "I'm going to go out and get Mrs. Mendenhall," because at that point the lull in the firing had continued. I said, "Don't go because you may endanger yourself and she knows how to take care of herself." He absolutely insisted and took off and got to the residence to find that Nonie, since the servants wanted to get with—they were very worried about their families. With the lull in firing they decided they wanted to take off and join and see how their families were and take care of them. The French lady went back to her house. Nonie at that point was just about to get into our Volkswagen bug which we had brought to Madagascar and drive to the embassy. It actually turned out to be a wonderful thing that the defense attaché did go out because he knew where the military forces were and where they might fire. He avoided them. Just about the time that they left the residence the firing resumed. So he drove around them whereas Nonie would have taken the direct route to the embassy right into the midst of the firing. So it was a good thing he did get her and bring her to the embassy.

LC: Yes. I mean the fact that you had no radio contact with her must have been—

JM: Well, you know, one worries more when there is no contact. She did, too, and I think one of the reasons she wanted to take off was because there was no contact.

LC: Right. She wanted to know how you were, I'm sure.

JM: I don't think she was so worried. We were not in a danger area in the embassy, but our residence was. Anyway, this was Nonie's last experience under fire because I had officially retired from the Foreign Service a few days before this took place. Let me give you the background on that.

LC: Sure.

JM: In January I began to sum things up in my mind. The State Department renewed an offer, which had been made previously, that if personnel retired, I think, by the end of January they would get a bigger retirement benefit than if they postponed their retirement beyond that date. This was to encourage people to retire, I think. That had been authorized by congressional law. So I sat down to begin calculating. One thing I was very much annoyed by the fact that Congress had pretty well taken over the making of our foreign policy at that time from the executive branch.

LC: Yes, right. After Watergate and Vietnam.

JM: After '75. Second I sat down and calculated that I was effectively serving as ambassador for about three thousand dollars a year after I took into account all the expenses, which I wouldn't have if I retired. So those various things encouraged me to apply to the department for retirement effective January 31st. The department said that it wanted me to continue to serve as ambassador for four more months in effect as a political appointee, which after the retirement from the Foreign Service became effective. So that's the reason we continued on in Madagascar after I had officially retired. Interestingly, Laura, the last day before my retirement became effective I got a telegram from the department saying, "Do you want to be considered for one of the U.S. ambassadorial posts in New York in the U.S. mission to the United Nations?" I immediately cabled back and said, "Thanks but no thanks." I already felt in my mind that the UN scarcely served U.S. interests any longer. I certainly didn't want to live in New York City. Nonie's sitting here and she says, "Too bad."

LC: Was she interested?

JM: Well, she says it was her hometown. Well, she did have some relatives still living there, distant relatives.

LC: Would it have pleased her, do you think?

JM: Well, she says that it would have pleased her, I think, but I had no desire.

Anyway, I turned it down flatly, but continued on for the four months as ambassador. Well, with the firing, which had resumed on the second day, stopped rather fairly shortly. A truce was worked out. What occurred as a result of the truce was the designation of an eighteen-member committee from the armed forces as the governing body of the country, with the head of it the then leading ranking general in the armed forces, Brigadier General Andriamahazo, whom I knew very well and liked very much as the head of it, which sort of encouraged me that he was the head of this committee. But as time went on things didn't turn out the way I anticipated with him as the head. One of the first things, the committee made the rule that no embassy could bring coded telegrams to the telegraph office to send to the capitals. We in Madagascar at the embassy didn't have our own independent communication systems, which a lot of embassies did have.

LC: Right. Right.

JM: Ours was sent through the local post office. They indicated no coded ones. All we could do then was communicate to Washington in the open where the Malagasy could read all of our messages. This was the first adverse thing that happened. Then a curfew was declared from 6:00PM, I think, to 6:00AM. This continued for weeks and went into months. I was able to communicate to Washington via the NASA space station, not in code of course. It had to be in the open. Since I felt that that might be somewhat secure from the Malagasy I was able to use that. Then all of the sudden toward the end of March, the Malagasy government learned about this and learned that the NASA communications also somehow were connected with the Malagasy communication system. They just unplugged NASA. So the space station could no longer continue to operate for its purposes, nor could I send messages. Then the only means of communication we had left with Washington was via, I think, it was the courier pouch that came every week or ten days, which is not very satisfactory, of course, but then we did learn that we could talk via a very poor radio communications unit with our embassy in Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania. So I did occasionally send a telegram via that means, but it was laborious doing so. But we were really out of any really effective means of communication with Washington for months on end. After the NASA space communication system was unplugged by the Malagasy, I asked to call on General Andriamahazo to try to get it restored. When I called on him I was very surprised to find

a young major sitting with him and clearly rather hostile in his attitude. Andriamahazo's demeanor in dealing with me was not nearly as open as I expected. So, I didn't really get anywhere, but this was sort of an eye-opener that his power was extremely limited, if he had much at all, in this eighteen-man committee. Ratsiraka incidentally, who had not been a member of the brief government of Ratsimandrava, was a member of this eighteen-man committee. As time went on it became increasingly clear that he was the principal figure behind this black versus brown *coup d'état* or assassination of the prime minister and subsequent *coup d'état*. Anyway, I wasn't able to get the NASA communications restored because I'd been counting on Andriamahazo and he couldn't do it. Andriamahazo was also avoiding contact with me in any official sense, I think, so as not to be painted by other members of this armed forces committee as being simply pro-American. So my time began to approach when the four months of stay as an effective political appointee was coming to an end. I asked to call on Andriamahazo to say goodbye. Interestingly, he asked me to do it as his house, not at his office. Then I met him at his house and all of it began to pour out of him, the woes he was having in a political sense, with this committee dominated by radicals. At that point, we were so close to leaving we'd even sent our effects out of the country that I could only proceed with my retirement. I left about the middle of May. Shortly after that Andriamahazo retired himself, resigned actually. I think he retired from the army. Ratsiraka took over as the dictator, indicating the kind of head of Madagascar, I guess, presidential title he took indicating the kind of president he was from the standpoint of our interests. He asked the North Koreans to furnish the bodyguards for his office and residence. So for the next fifteen years, Ratsiraka was a very hostile dictator in Madagascar as far as we were concerned. By 1990, I think he began to soften a bit because he saw that things were not—the country was continuing to deteriorate economically. I think in the last few years he was there we had fewer problems with him. Then he was finally voted out of office in an election, I think, sometime in the 1990s. I say "I think" because it was very difficult for me to try to follow Malagasy affairs. I was living in Italy. There was virtually nothing in the press about Madagascar, but I think that's what happened. Anyway, Madagascar proved to be a real mess as, in effect, an enemy nation for a long time. Ratsiraka had acceded to establish diplomatic relations with both Communist

China and the Soviet Union even before that while he was foreign minister. So they had even greater influence, but obviously he preferred North Koreans even then.

LC: While you were there, Joe, did you see earlier evidences of Soviet and Chinese activity or interest there?

JM: Well, since Ratsiraka was himself clearly a radical and favored these countries and even invited Madame Binh, the head of the so-called Provisional Revolutionary Government of Vietnam to attend a big ceremony. I think this was in January of '75 shortly before Ramanantsoa resigned. She was right there in the stands a few seats from me as the American ambassador. I almost walked out, but I thought I might hurt my own relationships with other Malagasy government officials if I did, so I didn't. Since Ratsiraka himself was such a radical he inclined toward the non-aligned and even toward the communists. Clearly the Soviets and the Chinese communists were in a more favorable position. Whether they had much actual influence with him doesn't matter because he was already of that persuasion.

LC: Joe, the period that you're talking about here, just the spring of 1975, of course, is critical for the sort of closure of American influence at all in South Vietnam. I wonder if you recall being able to keep track at all with the disturbed communications that you've described, being able to keep track of what was happening in Vietnam.

JM: Yes. I think I was able to because we did get distribution of the USIS news bulletin. It was unclassified. So I don't remember how we got it, probably by mail, but I was able to keep up with that. I think we got the *International Herald Tribune*, also.

LC: Thank God for that.

JM: Yeah, right.

LC: Joe, do you recall having any—what your reactions were as you watched the collapse of South Vietnam from this very different vantage point?

JM: Oh, I of course was appalled—not too surprised, but appalled by what was happening. Like Graham Martin, our ambassador out there, I know I continued to have hope that the end could be held off, but it proved not to be the case. No. I felt extremely discouraged over the future of U.S. foreign policy in view of what had happened there and in Cambodia and Laos.

LC: Joe, I think it might be useful to, if you would, say a few words about why

you felt that way with the collapse of U.S.-supported states and governments in those countries.

JM: Because I felt that this signified a real defeat in both a foreign policy in a military sense for the United States. In political and psychological terms, it could mean that, it would mean that the Soviets and the—well, we had better relations with the Chinese communists, but certainly with the Soviets, with which we were still in great political and military competition, would have a much easier time expanding their influence in the world. Indeed, I feel strongly that our collapse in Vietnam, the consequences of it, I think, are still being felt. It's one reason I think that our enemy in Iraq continues to hold out as it does because they know what happened in Vietnam and they think if they hold out long enough that U.S. political will in the media and Congress in the U.S. will collapse as it did in Vietnam. Unfortunately, they could be right.

LC: Well, things sort of look that way at the moment and that was one thing I wanted—yeah.

JM: Iraq is certainly in many ways a repetition of what happened in Southeast Asia. As you know, Laura, I feel strongly that by 1970 or '71 we had won the guerilla war finally in South Vietnam after floundering around for a long time, for ten years in effect, but we finally had won that war. I think in Madagascar after, or excuse me. In Iraq after four years, I think we had finally found a strategy which doesn't guarantee success, but which certainly has a better chance for success than anything that happened before. That is certainly an implied criticism of Bush and his administration for not reaching an effective strategy before, but I haven't seen any suggestions from the opposition over the years about what could be a successful strategy until this one came along.

LC: One of the things that you mentioned, Joe, *apropos* of your decision to take the State Department's offer essentially to buy you out was that Congress had seized such a central role in setting American foreign policy. Is that what's more or less happening now?

JM: Well, the Democrats certainly are trying to do that. So far the Republicans are resisting successfully because of the filibuster rules in the Senate, but again what is happening reminds me of what was happening during the earlier years of the 1970s. It

could go the wrong way. It certainly could.

LC: As you just mentioned, the implications for U.S. influence and prestige abroad of the defeat in Vietnam were, essentially, I would say catastrophic. Maybe that's over—

JM: Laura, I'll make another point. I think that the Soviets were encouraged to launch the war in Afghanistan because they felt we wouldn't react in view of the fact that we copped out in Vietnam.

LC: This is the 1979 invasion?

JM: 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan four years after our final defeat in Vietnam. Excuse me, Laura.

LC: Sure. One might also look at Angola even a little bit earlier in the 1970s and begin to see Cuban influence there supported by the Soviet Union and sort of testing the waters again whether the United States would react. Of course, the U.S. didn't.

JM: I feel, Laura, that the Carter administration from 1977 to 1981 was the worst that we have had certainly since the Harding administration in terms of the consequences for the United States in the foreign policy field, the foreign policy and military field. As I say, I think that Carter, of course, continued in effect a policy ensuing from our pull-out in Vietnam, caused the U.S. influence in the world to diminish which I think led to—was one of the factors and certainly a significant factor leading to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as I said, then of course to the hostage crisis in Iran. Never has U.S. prestige, I think, sunk so low as it did during that crisis, which Carter could in no way solve. What happened was that the day that Reagan was inaugurated president, the Iranian government, the revolutionary government, decided to release the U.S. hostages. Thank God that Reagan was elected in 1980, because he began certainly to restore the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviets. Then came the Sandinista-Contra conflict in Nicaragua, where I think Reagan was absolutely right in what he was trying to do, but again the enmity in Congress, particularly on the part of the Democrats against what was happening there, again adversely affected us. I feel that we would not have had the Gulf War in 199—Sadaam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War in 1990 and '91 if we had not been defeated in Vietnam because I think that encouraged Sadaam to think that we would never really react to his invasion of Kuwait. So the consequences have

been felt all along since ’75. As I indicated, I think they’re continuing to be felt.

LC: Of course, Joe, many people now are arguing that the Bush administration’s failure to regularize a new government in Iraq and therefore having to maintain U.S. troops on an increasing scale there for the number of years that they’ve been there has also sort of spun away some U.S. prestige. Do you see that or do you see it as the opposite?

JM: Well, I—excuse me, Laura—I think that certainly U.S. prestige in terms of deterrence has been damaged by the fact that we have not been successful in the war in Iraq. In that sense those people are right. I also feel that putting additional pressure on the present Iraqi government to reach political compromises is a very useful thing. On that point, I think some of the Democrats have a good issue, but they don’t push that as strongly as pull-out, which I think is absolutely the wrong way to go at it. I would put additional pressure on the Iraqi government to proceed with the political compromises which are necessary there. You can’t reach an effective political outcome, a satisfactory political outcome, unless you are also strong in the military sphere because security is elementary to what you try to do in the political area. That I learned from Vietnam that security must come first and what you attempt to do politically has to be based on providing effective security to the people within your dealing because to them above all naturally it’s their lives that count.

LC: Right. You mentioned that when we talked at length about your observations of the coup attempt in 1960, about those participating certainly had their own interests in mind and that includes survival.

JM: Right. That was the coup of ’63.

LC: Oh, I beg your pardon, yes. Absolutely. Just looking back at Asia for a moment, Joe, just recently there have been some waves from North Korea which makes it look as if the crisis there over a nuclear weapons development delivery systems may be subsiding. I wonder if you see that as perhaps a kind of undercounted, underplayed and success of the Bush administration’s foreign policy in Asia.

JM: In a sense, Laura, but I would not rush to judgment because I so mistrust Kim Jong Il that I’m never sure how far he’ll go in this area. So I don’t want to proclaim victory until it’s actually clear that there has been one. What I do think is underplayed

very much is the effect on Libya of our entry into the war in Iraq and the overthrow of Sadaam Hussein. I think that was a major factor in Gaddafi's, shall I call it, conversion.

LC: Right, to now being essentially an emissary for us in areas that we—

JM: And the fact that he gave up his interest in nuclearization of his country.

LC: In the support of anti-Western terrorism, which we think back about the Lockerbie.

JM: So I think that has not been played sufficiently at all as a very satisfactory effect of our invasion of Iraq.

LC: Well, Joe, I've kept you now for a little bit longer.

JM: We've reached your time, Laura.

LC: Than I intended but—

JM: I have actually concluded my dear. So unless you have something you want to—

LC: Well, what I would like to do, I think, is to thank you very much on the record for all the time you've spent speaking with me. It's been a great education for me and will no doubt be the same for many people who will listen to some parts or if they are deeply committed, to all of the fifty-seven sessions that we've done together. I thank you so much, Joe.

JM: Well, Laura, it has been a great pleasure to me both personally and professionally, to have been associated with you in this oral history effort on the part of the two of us. I have enjoyed my contact with you immensely. I admire you from a professional standpoint and certainly wish you every success in the new venture that you are undertaking.

LC: Thank you, Joe. Thank you. That's very kind.