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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Rufus Phillips
Date: September 14, 2005
Conducted by Dr. Richard Verrone
Transcribed by Emilie Meadors**

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.

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1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone conducting an oral history
2 interview with Mr. Rufus Phillips. Today is September 14, 2005; it's a little after 10:00
3 AM central standard time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech
4 University in the Vietnam Archive and within that building I am in the interview room.
5 Rufus is in McLean, Virginia, and Rufus, I want to thank you for participating in this
6 interview project and for contributing to the history of the Vietnam was and the future
7 record of the war. And with that, let's start with some basic biographical information
8 about yourself.

9 Rufus Phillips: Okay.

10 RV: Tell me when you were born, where you were born, and a little bit about your
11 childhood.

12 RP: Well, I was born in Middletown, Ohio on August 10th, 1929. My father came
13 to Middletown originally. He was one of five children, no six children: four boys and two
14 girls.

15 RV: Okay.

16 RP: He was the son of one of the co-founders of Armco Steel who was the
17 secretary. So, he was Rufus C. Phillips Jr. and I wound up being Rufus C. Phillips III.

1 RV: Okay.

2 RP: My mother was born in New York City. She was the child of a German
3 musician who had been the chairman of the Peabody Institute in Baltimore Conservatory
4 where my grandmother had been a student. They fell in love, got married, went to
5 Germany. She grew up in Germany until just before World War I. She and her mother
6 came back to the US and my grandmother divorced my grandfather, so my mother grew
7 up down in rural Virginia and my father grew up in Middletown, Ohio. They met in New
8 York; he was a successful stockbroker and he lost everything in the Depression.

9 RV: Wow.

10 RP: So, he decided not to go accept a job in Armco Steel which he could have
11 done which I think he viewed of kind of a handout. He decided to go down to rural
12 Virginia and settle on my mother's ancestral place down there which is in Charlotte
13 County about twenty-five miles from Appomattox where the Civil War ended.

14 RV: Okay.

15 RP: And so, I grew up there. I was about two when I arrived and that's all I knew.
16 It was a rural Virginia county in the midst of the Depression. My father worked on the
17 roads and wrote for a living. He wrote short stories, he published a novel, and he started a
18 furniture business in a nearby town and so that's how we survived. I actually grew up in a
19 log cabin.

20 RV: Really? Was there electricity and running water, or—?

21 RP: No, no electricity, no running water. There was a well in the back, there was a
22 privy. It was originally an overseer's cabin on displace and he put siding on it and put a
23 new roof on it and that's where I grew up for the first years of my life until I was six and
24 went to school and my only friends were black kids on the place.

25 RV: Oh really?

26 RP: I think that's one of the reasons why, in a way, it was so easy for me to feel at
27 home with people who didn't look like me.

28 RV: Right.

29 RP: In any case, I went to school there to a segregated school. Of course, that's
30 the way things were back then when I started at school. And so those were the economic

1 circumstances. I didn't feel any particular hardship because everybody didn't have very
2 much.

3 RV: That's what you knew.

4 RP: Well, at least I had shoes. There were kids going to school that didn't have
5 shoes in the wintertime.

6 RV: Wow, so you have pretty vivid memories of the Depression in rural Virginia
7 in the 1930s.

8 RP: Oh yes, yeah.

9 RV: How would you describe what the depression was doing to the rural south
10 and where you were there in Virginia?

11 RP: Well, the rural south was already depressed. I mean, in never recovered from
12 the Civil War. There was a lack of employment; the economic base was growing tobacco
13 basically. And then tobacco prices went to hell and only when the New Deal came in and
14 they formed kind of, I don't know what you'd call it, but there were federal controls on
15 the growth of tobacco and you had a lot. So, you were willing to grow more than the
16 market, but could take care of or if there was in a particular year, the government bought
17 it so there was some price support.

18 RV: Right.

19 RP: But that was about everything that was going on. I mean, rural electrification
20 didn't arrive until about 1937 or '38. The roads were not paved except for a couple of
21 highways in the county. It wasn't much changed I would guess from around, you know,
22 the 1900s except people did have some automobiles. Anyway, we moved out of that log
23 cabin after my sister was born in 1936 into what was the original plantation house; we
24 called it the big house. We still have a Delco, which is a system of batteries in a generator
25 that charged the batteries and then you ran the batteries and that ran some electric lights
26 in the house and then we had a ram that pumped water up to the house. Things were
27 better in the house because my grandmother decided to move out and so we moved in.

28 RV: Okay.

29 RP: Things improved a little bit supposed from a living point of view.

30 RV: Rufus, tell me a little bit about your mother and father and their personalities.
31 You mentioned your father was a writer. What kind of things did he write about?

1 RP: Fiction.

2 RV: Okay, a particular type of fiction, was it science fiction?

3 RP: It was very much in the way of Hemingway, realistic school. He wrote a book

4 about basically his first novel was about growing up in Middletown and a young man

5 going off to World War I. It was very critical of the, not by name, but the main founder of

6 Armco Steel, who was George Verde, so the book actually got banned in Middletown.

7 RV: Wow.

8 RP: Which increased its sales needless to say, surreptitious? My mother was a

9 resilient person; my father was a very strong personality.

10 RV: In what sense?

11 RP: Oh, very opinionated and he could be quite violent when he got angry.

12 Leading in the years, leading up to World War II he was pretty isolationist because he

13 had flown for the RAF (Royal Air Force), the Canadian RAF in World War I and

14 intensely disliked the British and felt like the British and the French had let us down.

15 RV: Why did he dislike the British so much?

16 RP: Beg your pardon?

17 RV: Why did he like the British so much?

18 RP: He felt they were overbearing and looked down on everybody else and we

19 sort have been induced to come in and save their bacon and then they were the ones who

20 really, because of the post-war, World War I policies were responsible for the rise of

21 Hitler. So, he was opposed to getting involved and bailing out the British again.

22 RV: Did he talk to you about his service in World War I?

23 RP: Yeah, he did. He didn't go into great detail, but he had very strong opinions.

24 I think he was part of that generation that was disillusioned by the American involvement

25 in World War I and the results afterwards.

26 RV: You said he was a pilot, what did he fly?

27 RP: Oh, he flew Sopwith Camel, and I've forgotten what other aircraft. He

28 actually arrived in Europe right at the end so I'm not sure how much combat he saw.

29 RV: Right, he's flying at the dawn of aviation used in military conflict.

30 RP: That's right. Yeah, and he loved flying and that was his other passion was he

31 was a great believer in air power and great supporter of Billy Mitchell's who was

1 cashiered by the Army for being a proponent of air power. He loved aviation and as he
2 got enough money he would fly, you know. We had a small airfield not too far from us
3 and he would go over there and rent a plane and keep his hand in flight.

4 RV: Did he ever take you up?

5 RP: No, no back then most of the planes were single seater's, at least the ones that
6 you could rent for a low cost. We had a great event when I grew up. We had a plain come
7 flying low over our place and circling and it ran out of gas and these two guys who were
8 bomb storming landed in a field and so we rode out to find out who they were and took
9 them in and then the next day helped to get some gas for their plane and in a whole bunch
10 of locals held onto the plane while they revved it up so they could get it off of the short
11 field. I'll always remember that.

12 RV: Were you interested in flying as well?

13 RP: Yeah, I did some early flying. I soloed, took lessons down in the airfield
14 south of Alexandria, Virginia, but I didn't have the same interest, you know, devotion to
15 it that my father did.

16 RV: Right, tell me about your family, how many brothers and sisters?

17 RP: I have one sister. She was born in 1936, so she was seven years younger than
18 I am.

19 RV: What was her name?

20 RP: Lucretia, L-U-C-R-E-T-I-A.

21 RV: How would you describe her? Her personality and the relationship the two of
22 you have?

23 RP: Well, we were not too close because of the age difference.

24 RV: Right.

25 RP: She's, I suppose, more shy and retiring than I am. She had her—she was a
26 rebellious child. She rebelled more openly against my parents than I did. I was a quiet
27 rebellious type.

28 RV: That so perfectly fits what you would go on to do, actually.

29 RP: Yes, and then solemnly married a guy who lived in Bronxville, New York,
30 came from an old family there who became a reporter for the *New York Times*.

1 RV: Okay, tell me a little bit about your childhood. What did you like to do, what
2 were your hobbies and then describe your early school days?

3 RP: Well, I love sports and back then the only real sport you could play was
4 baseball which I loved. I was a great fan of the Cincinnati Reds because I had an uncle
5 who lived in Cincinnati and my grandmother lived in Middletown and I used to go out
6 and visit her sometimes in the summertime and then go over to see the Reds play. I did
7 what boys in the country did which was, well, I went to 4H camp, I raised quail, a friend
8 of my father's gave me a rifle when I was about eight. I used to go out squirrel hunting
9 and we ate squirrel in those days. We put them basically into something called Brunswick
10 stew which was a local kind of stew. And I wandered around the place. We had a lot of
11 big old oak trees and some of them were maybe three hundred, four hundred years old. I
12 imagined that I was back in the days, you know, before the Europeans arrived. You know
13 the powerful affect on a child's imagination. I read a lot; I was a very avid reader at one
14 point. In the summer I read about three or four books a week.

15 RV: Now, where did that come from? Was that from you or—?

16 RP: Probably from my father and mother. I mean, you have pretty sophisticated
17 people, very sophisticated people. My father could talk about Niche, could talk about
18 philosophy, could talk about anything. So, you had that influence and the influence of
19 ideas and so I suppose that it was very influence that encouraged me to read. But of
20 course, when I was a child growing up, I read mainly adventure stories. And then another
21 friend of my father's gave me a series of books by G.A. Henti which were about British
22 history. And in them is always a young man who's with Clive in India or Kushner in
23 Khartoum or, you know, that kind of thing. So, I suppose I developed a love of adventure
24 and even far off places. I was fascinated by Terry and the Pirates. I never thought I'd get
25 out there. I couldn't imagine myself out there. And then the other thing that influenced
26 me, I think was one of my hobbies was collecting stamps and I had an uncle in Richmond
27 who worked for the American Tobacco Company, and he corresponded with Tobacco
28 growers all over the world. One of the things that happened in the twenties was that the
29 folks from the British and French colonies sent people to Virginia to learn how to grow
30 tobacco. And they did and so when American cigarettes had mainly, of course, Virginia
31 bright tobacco in them, but they did have a mixture of tobacco that came from other areas

1 of the world. So, he collected—he would just clip out all these stamps from every place
2 in the world. Of course, they were always back then they were colonies. So, I had stamps
3 from every colony in Africa practically.

4 RV: Wow.

5 RP: You know, from Asia so learned geography.

6 RV: I was going to ask you, did you kind of map out and see where—of course,
7 yeah.

8 RP: So, you know, I had here in rural Virginia, you know, kind of some
9 intellectual and geographic raising, probably unusual for that place in time.

10 RV: Yes, it seems very atypical for that place and in that time.

11 RP: Yes, I would say it was, yeah.

12 RV: Do you look back now at your youth and this intellectual environment that
13 you created for yourself in your mind, but also the influence of your parents. I mean, how
14 much did this affect you in what you did with your career do you think?

15 RP: Well, I think it undoubtably had an impact on me. I was still, you know,
16 pretty unsophisticated. I think the things that also impacted me were that when Pearl
17 Harbor came my father enlisted promptly in the US Army Air Corps. He was
18 commissioned, went through training commission to captain, but he was too old, and they
19 wouldn't let him fly so he wound up being in charge of a training squadron down in
20 Miami Beach. We moved down to Miami Beach for about two years during the war. That
21 was, of course, a complete change of environment. I found it enjoyable particularly
22 because I joined a Boy Scout troop that was headed by a Seminole Indian. And so, we
23 went out in the Everglades and camped out a lot.

24 RV: That's incredible.

25 RP: That was just marvelous.

26 RV: I mean that's the Seminole Indians and in the Everglades in the Seminole
27 Wars. I mean, he is the expert on that area.

28 RP: Of course.

29 RV: Wow.

30 RP: And his son was part of the troop and was my best friend. So, you know,
31 there I was, this was 1942 and I was twelve and thirteen. I was already almost six feet tall

1 and so one of the embarrassing things was I got asked on the street sometimes by some of
2 the trainees as to why I was shirking the service.

3 RV: And (laughs) you were a thirteen-year-old.

4 RP: Yeah.

5 RV: Rufus, before we—I want to ask a little more about that, but let me ask you
6 just, can you describe this area in rural Virginia where you grew up. It sounds like a
7 former plantation farm, but was it a working farm?

8 RP: Yeah, it was a working farm.

9 RV: Was it tobacco?

10 RP: Tobacco growing mainly, yeah.

11 RV: And your father, he wrote, but did he also work the farm, or you said he
12 worked on roads?

13 RP: Well, he raised some hogs, and he did things like that, but it was almost for
14 our own self sufficiency. The place had some tenant farmers on it, and they raised
15 tobacco and corn and stuff like that. He grew a garden, we canned stuff, and my mother
16 canned stuff. So, you know, and then all my friends were sons of farm families in the
17 surrounding area.

18 RV: Tell me about that, you mentioned that most of your friends were black and
19 that's highly unusual.

20 RP: Well, that's before I went to school. And then the black family that I was so
21 close to, particularly one particular fellow named Robby Foster, they moved off and that
22 coincided with my going to segregated elementary school. And so, then I didn't have any
23 close black friends and so all my friends became white.

24 RV: How did that affect you going really from one extreme to the other?

25 RP: Well, I don't know. I think that first of all, you know, there was some
26 meanest in some whites towards the blacks and of course I never felt that. I remember
27 some of the white kids throwing rocks at black kids from the bus. I never joined in, in
28 that. But segregation was just sort of a fact of life that everybody accepted. There wasn't
29 much questioning of it.

30 RV: Did you understand it?

1 RP: My parents felt that the education system was rotten and that something
2 needed to be done about that and that blacks ought to have the right to vote. My father
3 was very strong on that. Social segregation was an idea that they share, but they didn't
4 have a typical opinion towards segregation. So, I think I was probably affected by that,
5 too.

6 RV: Why do you think that they did not have this typical opinion?

7 RP: Well, because my father came from Ohio and going to school with black kids.
8 And then he played football for Trinity, he played football, I don't know, I think they had
9 some black students at Trinity, and he just didn't feel it was right. And my mother went
10 to Barnard and then took a job in New York with a magazine. So, you know, they did not
11 have a lot of the typical opinions.

12 RV: Did that cause any kind of friction there in Virginia that you were aware of?

13 RP: Some probably from my father because he could be quite outspoken. He
14 wrote some short stories that were pretty critical of the way blacks were treated. So, I
15 think there was some underlying tension there. And of course, there was also some
16 underlying tension because back then folks that came down from the north were not
17 easily accepted.

18 RV: Right.

19 RP: So, you know, sure there was some tension. It didn't play itself out in me.

20 RV: Did you ever or do you remember hearing or sensing anything about the
21 Civil War?

22 RP: Oh man!

23 RV: I was going to say how dead (laughs) was that or how alive it was.

24 RP: The war between the state?

25 RV: That's right, the war between the state. Spoken like a true southerner.

26 RP: Well, let me tell you something about rural Virginia back then.

27 Psychologically the war's affects were still there. I mean, people hardly celebrated the
28 fourth of July. There were no parades, there were no fireworks. Fireworks were
29 something that shot off around Christmas time. In the schools, you first learned the
30 history of Virginia before you learned the history of the United States. Something my

1 father really took exception to. And then we had Appomattox only twenty-five miles
2 away.

3 RV: Exactly.

4 RP: In the Charlotte courthouse which was about eight miles away which is the
5 county seat in the middle of the crossroads where the courthouse stood. The courthouse
6 by the way, is designed by Thomas Jefferson.

7 RV: Yes.

8 RP: There was a statue as there was in every courthouse in Virginia and probably
9 throughout the south of a confederate soldier standing, facing south. And so sure, and
10 then my grandmother was absolutely unreconstructed. She had five uncles that fought in
11 the war. One of them marched out at the Battle of New Market.

12 RV: Wow.

13 RP: Another one died in the Siege of Richmond. So, that was very vivid for her.
14 She, you know, she would never say President Lincoln, he was always Mr. Lincoln.

15 RV: That's very interesting. How did you feel about this? Do you remember as a
16 young boy forming an opinion either way?

17 RP: Well, yes. Just that there was a certain pride about the fact that, you know, a
18 rag tag bunch of southerners that had been able to fight so well and the whole lost to the
19 Yankees. So, there was a myth and a reality in a reference for Robert E. Lee that was not
20 extended to Ulysses S. Grant, certainly not Sherman. So, yeah, I think there's some
21 marshal tradition there, which I believe, in retrospect, has some affect on me.

22 RV: Okay. Well, once you got into the segregated school, tell me about the kind
23 of education you had.

24 RP: Well, it was basically like reading, writing, and arithmetic. It was pretty good
25 on the basics. But once it got beyond there, beyond grade school, it was obvious that high
26 school was not going to prepare me very well for going to college. So, when we came
27 back to Virginia towards the end of the war, my father sent me off to prep school in
28 Orange, Virginia called Woodberry Forest.

29 RV: Woodberry Forest, yes, I know it well.

30 RP: So, and that really provided me with an opportunity to place board and get a
31 real education and get into Yale.

1 RV: Well, so the two years in Miami you remember the Boy Scout experience.

2 What else do you remember about World War II?

3 RP: I remember going to junior high there. Miami Beach was about, oh I guess
4 maybe eighty, ninety percent Jewish so I thought it was wonderful because we got all the
5 Jewish holidays in addition to the Christian and other national holidays. And it was just a
6 different experience. These kids were obviously more sophisticated.

7 RV: Tell me about World War II, do you remember Pearl Harbor?

8 RP: Yeah.

9 RV: I guess, well back up to the thirties. How aware were you as a young boy
10 about what was brewing in Europe and around the world?

11 RP: Not too much. I don't think I paid much attention.

12 RV: Okay, is your first real big memory of World War II Pearl Harbor?

13 RP: Yeah, yeah.

14 RV: What was that like for you?

15 RP: Well, my father was out on the front lawn with our dog about one o'clock in
16 the afternoon. We just finished lunch. I guess my father and mother turned on the radio
17 and my father came out and said, "The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor, I'm going to
18 volunteer." So that then changed our lives.

19 RV: How did you react when he said that?

20 RP: I suppose, you know, that's a good question, I hadn't thought about that. I
21 suppose I was proud of them. Everybody was very patriotic and so, "Whatever you say,
22 daddy."

23 RV: What about your mother? Do you remember her reaction?

24 RP: No, but I think she's supported him very strongly. I mean, the nation was
25 really unified.

26 RV: Yes.

27 RP: All of the objections to getting involved vanished in a moment.

28 RV: Well, looking back at that moment and comparing what World War II did for
29 this country and looking at the president at the time, what are your memories of Franklin
30 Roosevelt?

1 RP: Well, my father and mother were republicans believe it or not and I don't
2 think —they may have been one of the two republican families in Charlotte County
3 which was overwhelmingly democratic; traditional democratic, of course. I think that was
4 my father coming out of Ohio and he just didn't like Roosevelt personally. So, I didn't
5 absorb that particular prejudice one way or the other I don't think.

6 RV: Do you remember listening to Roosevelt on the radio?

7 RP: Yes.

8 RV: The Fireside Chat?

9 RP: Particularly not until, you know, the war started and then sure.

10 RV: What did your father think about Roosevelt and the way he dealt with the
11 Great Depression?

12 RP: That's a good question. I think he felt that he was mainly a showman. See, he
13 had a very personal view because he knew people on Wall Street that knew Roosevelt
14 who felt that Roosevelt had failed as a stockbroker, or he'd been involved in one time on
15 Wall Street. So, it was just kind of a personal prejudice on his part. You know, it wasn't
16 any kind of class thing. "Let's all go down and kiss Roosevelt."

17 RV: Right, right.

18 RP: Kind of a thing, but people took their politics very personally. Well, I guess
19 they still do, but in those days. And they just didn't like them.

20 RV: You rarely hear about that view of Roosevelt. You know, he kind of was the
21 great savior of the country in the 1930s.

22 RP: Well, he certainly was, and I think that, you know, my father would probably
23 modify his views because he then eventually became a supporter of Truman, so people
24 changed their point of view, but back then, as I say, politics were very personal.

25 RV: What did you think about Roosevelt yourself?

26 RP: I don't think I thought much about it, you know, until I got maybe to
27 Woodberry and then probably more in college. I tended to be, let me say, more open, you
28 know, and have less prejudices about things. My father was in some ways kind of a
29 Darwinian, I mean, you know, a survival of the fittest kind of a guy and I was more
30 attracted to the feeling that it wasn't just, you know, in what you inherited in terms of

1 genes, it was also the milieu that you grew up in. So, we used to have classic arguments
2 about that.

3 RV: That's interesting you mention that. I wanted to ask you, how much did
4 you—as you grew up, you know, you became a young man, how much did you and your
5 father discuss these large issues?

6 RP: Yeah, quite a bit.

7 RV: Yeah?

8 RP: Yeah, he liked to take exception to some of what I was being taught at Yale
9 by my professors, so we'd have a lot of classic arguments. He loved to argue.

10 RV: He must have done well financially there to send you to Woodberry Forest.

11 RP: Well, I went on a scholarship. It wasn't too costly to him, and I went to Yale
12 on a scholarship.

13 RV: You mentioned sports, you're into baseball. Did that continue through when
14 you were in junior high and then in high school?

15 RP: Yeah, I played baseball, but then my eyesight started to go. I became
16 gradually more nearsighted so when I got to Woodberry, I switched over to track, I
17 wrestled, and I played football.

18 RV: Okay, well tell me about Woodberry Forest and coming from junior high, I
19 guess in Miami, back to Virginia, and then to this private school. What was the
20 atmosphere like there at Woodberry Forest?

21 RP: Well, in terms of the schooling it was a lot more exacting. I found really that
22 whereas I read pretty widely, there was a lot I didn't know, a lot of skills I didn't have,
23 but I did quite well and played a lot of sports.

24 RV: What were your favorite subjects in school and really—?

25 RP: I think English because I had a wonderful English teacher and History.

26 RV: Okay, and did your father's writing or the fact that he was an author, did that
27 affect you? Were you leaning that way with what you maybe wanted to do?

28 RP: No, I didn't have the same talent, natural talent he did for writing. You know,
29 he had a natural bent for writing fiction. I had to struggle with that. I gradually improved,
30 but I tended to be a person that when I wrote, I wasn't naturally descriptive which he had
31 a talent for.

1 RV: What kind of scholarship did you have to Woodberry?

2 RP: Academic.

3 RV: So, you did quite well then academically?

4 RP: Yes, I think I was third in my class when I graduated.

5 RV: Was it an effort or did this kind of come naturally for you?

6 RP: No, I'd say pretty naturally. I always had pretty good grades, was pretty

7 studious.

8 RV: What else about Woodberry Forest, you played sports, you performed well

9 academically, you enjoyed History and English, you mentioned you had some good

10 teachers in that realm. Tell me about these teachers and the impact they had upon you.

11 RP: Well, one of them was a fellow named Brewster Ford who really taught me to

12 love American writers and particularly writers of plays that got me very interested in

13 reading all the Pulitzer Prize plays. And so, I got very much involved in O'Neil and just

14 had that knack, you know, for inspiring interest and it helped me develop my writing

15 skills. That was, you know, I think this helped me a lot. I grew up in that sense and then I

16 had several good history teachers. I can't remember their names now, but history was

17 something I had read as a child, so I had a natural interest in that.

18 RV: What part of history did you find yourself at Woodbury Forest most

19 interested in?

20 RP: I would say American History. I went on to major in American History in

21 college.

22 RV: What position did you play in football Rufus?

23 RP: Tackle.

24 RV: Yeah, defensive or offensive?

25 RP: Well back then we played both ways.

26 RV: That's what I thought.

27 RP: Yeah, in high school.

28 RV: What was your favorite sport?

29 RP: Football.

30 RV: Yeah, why?

1 RP: I don't know, I loved the feeling of being on the team, I liked contact sports.
2 It was something you could take out some of your aggressive impulses on. It just was,
3 you know, it was a lot of excitement to it. And then I was fortunate being able to play on
4 some winning teams, you know, which adds to that excitement with a bunch of guys who
5 went on to play in various colleges.

6 RV: You were quite large by this time, weren't you? Tall?

7 RP: Yeah, well when I arrived at Woodberry, I was already weighing two
8 hundred pounds and I was over six feet.

9 RV: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your youth? What
10 about how you developed socially? You mentioned having the young black friends and
11 then moving forward?

12 RP: I'm pretty shy and I didn't smoke. I just never liked it.

13 RV: Were a lot of people smoking?

14 RP: Oh yeah, yeah. That was the sophisticated thing to do. But I was gregarious,
15 and I had a lot of friends. I was elected a prefect which is—or appointed a prefect which,
16 you know, you lived on a dorm and supervised all the other kids. Typical kind of
17 situation in a private boarding school. So, I guess I had some natural leadership qualities.

18 RV: That's what I wanted to ask about. When did you first notice that you were a
19 natural leader or that you were at least comfortable leading?

20 RP: You know, that's a good question, I never thought about it that way. I
21 suppose it was a Woodberry. I don't think I was the particular leadership leader when I
22 was a smaller child. Maybe I was more one than I thought. And then, you know that kind
23 of thing sort of gradually emerges.

24 RV: Yeah.

25 RP: I was not captain of any of the teams I played on, but, you know, I guess, you
26 know, I was told eventually by people who were my contemporaries that they looked up
27 to me, but I didn't look up to myself. I was raised, you know, in the situation in which
28 you didn't sort of pump up your own ego, it wasn't seemly. You should take a modest
29 approach to things. You know, you didn't brag and toughed it out with a stiff upper lip.
30 That was the way things were, that was the model of a man. And so, I suppose I tried to
31 Marvel myself on that.

1 RV: Is that what your father modeled for you?

2 RP: Well, that was kind of the ethos at the time. It was in literature; you admired
3 the people that endured great hardships that still managed to maintain their courage. I
4 mean, those were all manly standards. So, I think, you know, it was something that was
5 just in the air that you aspired to be.

6 RV: It seems also that there is a pattern establishing within your youth of
7 maybe—and this is completely—it could be unconscious of you, but you were someone
8 who would go against the grain. I mean, that you were comfortable, you thought okay by
9 being yourself and, you know, having that young black friend, being involved with taking
10 to the boy scouts into Miami with the Seminole leader and his son. You know, just doing
11 your thing. Did you notice this at the time?

12 RP: No, I don't think so.

13 RV: Okay.

14 RP: And I didn't flaunt it. And part of it, I suppose, was an independence from
15 my father. I felt confident when I rejected his advice.

16 RV: (Laughs) And so that helped you?

17 RP: Part of that, you know, is natural resistance of children to parents.

18 RV: What kind of advice was he giving you? What did he want you to do with
19 your life?

20 RP: Well, it really the first thing came to the head was he really wanted me to go
21 to the University of Virginia. He thought that I was a real Virginian that I would benefit
22 from growing up in Virginia and I think he thought as it turned out later on that I might
23 have some kind of a political career because I seemed to have ability to get along with
24 people. But any case, I resisted that and went to Yale.

25 RV: And why not Virginia? It had a great reputation then and now.

26 RP: Well, I was turned off by the party school aspect. It wasn't that I was sort of a
27 blue note, Woodberry was not very far from Virginia, so I went over there for a couple of
28 football weekends to see what was going on and people were drunk, you know, and piled
29 up like cord wood outside because they were drinking grain alcohol. It just wasn't the
30 scene. I was a fairly serious kid I think, and that scene didn't appeal to me. And then I

1 had this ambition to play football at Yale. I had two uncles that went to Yale. One of
2 whom came close to being an all-American center there. So that had some influence.

3 RV: Were you considering any other of the large southern universities such as
4 UNC Chapel Hill or?

5 RP: The other possibility might have been Princeton because there was a large
6 Woodberry contingent that went to Princeton. The Woodberry folks went north, they
7 went to Princeton.

8 RV: Okay.

9 RP: Although most went to the University of Virginia or North Carolina.

10 RV: What did you know about UNC Chapel Hill?

11 RP: Oh, by reputation, pretty good, but they tend to be the boys from North
12 Carolina that went there. Not the boys from Virginia. We're all pretty state oriented that
13 way back then.

14 RV: Yes, what years were you there at Woodberry Forest?

15 RP: I entered in '44 and graduated in '47.

16 RV: Okay, and then did you immediately go to Yale in '47?

17 RP: Yup, sure.

18 RV: Okay, well tell me about that decision and I guess you just kind of mentioned
19 that you had a history there, a familial history there. What else was it about Yale that
20 attracted you?

21 RP: Well, it was a great university obviously. Beyond that, I'm not sure. It had
22 great academic reputation. As a matter of fact, out of my class at Woodberry, we had the
23 largest contingent out I think that ever went to Yale.

24 RV: And you mentioned that you wanted to play football there, too?

25 RP: Yeah, and that was certainly a tradition.

26 RV: And were you recruited by Yale to play football?

27 RP: Nope, nope. I didn't do much recruiting, some of the alumni do. Of course,
28 they were interested in me because of that, but also because the academic record.

29 RV: Had you ever been up there to New Haven?

30 RP: Nope, never. It was kind of a shock because Woodberry's a beautiful rural
31 campus and all of a sudden here you are in the midst of this city. I wasn't too used to

1 living in cities though. My parents—my father started an engineering company at the end
2 of World War II before the war was over. He got out before the end of the war. It really
3 wasn't much for him to do. He started an engineering firm that designed airports because
4 of his aviation background. So, the firm was set up in Washington and during the winter
5 months they lived in Alexandria and then they'd go down on weekends to Gravel Hill
6 down in Charlotte County which was the name of the place. And then they'd spend some
7 more time down there in the summertime. I mean, I would have stayed down there in the
8 summertime. My mother would stay down there in the summertime.

9 RV: In Alexandria?

10 RP: No, in Charlotte County.

11 RV: Okay.

12 RP: So, we kept a place down there, but they moved up to Alexandria, but that
13 was when I—my second year in Woodberry.

14 RV: Okay.

15 RP: So, anyway, I'd never seen a campus in the middle of a city. I think that—

16 RV: It was a big shock.

17 RP: Yeah, it was a shock, yeah.

18 RV: How did you adapt to it?

19 RP: Well, I adapted to it pretty well. The, you know, I started off playing
20 freshman football and that introduced me to a lot of different people from different areas
21 of the country. I had some problems academically initially because I just couldn't fathom
22 calculus. I had done very well on all the mathematics up to that point. Freshman year was
23 pretty boring because, you know, you have instructors, not professors and I was taking
24 five subjects which included Zoology with a lab because I didn't know what I was going
25 to do. Whether I was going into engineering or liberal arts so I tried to straddle a whole
26 bunch of courses that will allow me to go in any direction and it turned out the
27 combination with playing football; that was just a hell of a load. I was also a bursary
28 student which meant that I had to work in the dining hall at the same time. So, I enjoyed
29 freshman year, but it was pretty tough, and I didn't do as well as they had projected so
30 they took away half of my scholarship.

31 RV: Did that get your attention?

1 RP: Oh yeah. They got my attention, so I had to borrow money for half of it.
2 Tuition was only six hundred dollars if you could imagine. Then I started to get much
3 better grades. My second year I was taking subjects I liked, and I eventually rationed my
4 average up to somewhere between eighty-eight and ninety.

5 RV: Okay. Was Yale what it seemed before you were there? Were your
6 expectations met?

7 RP: Well, I didn't know what to expect. We had, you know, there were more
8 veterans on campus than anybody else. That changed the nature of Yale. It was no longer
9 sort of a prep school haven. Our class was maybe twenty percent veteran, but the class
10 before us was easily fifty percent. The classes before that were higher than that. And so,
11 here were all these guys who were quite serious in pursuing getting an education. It didn't
12 mean they didn't have fun, you know, or be a little wild, but still with that kind of
13 atmosphere.

14 RV: Did you get along well with these veterans?

15 RP: Oh yeah. Well, I seemed to have a talent of getting along with them.

16 RV: Right, right. And tell me about football, how did that go? Did you continue to
17 play for four years?

18 RP: Yes, uh-huh.

19 RV: And what kind of teams were you on? Were you all successful?

20 RP: Well, we never beat Princeton which was, I don't know. Those were the years
21 when Princeton had a really great team and the last year, they had a guy named Casmeyer
22 that wound up in his next year, which is his senior year after I graduated of winning both
23 the Heisman Trophy and the Sullivan Trophy. It's the greatest athlete as well as the top
24 football player in the country. But we had winning records and we had a coach named
25 Herman Hickman who was a real character. So, it was a rewarding experience. And then
26 I joined a fraternity which was both a fraternity and secret society.

27 RV: Which one was it?

28 RP: Saint Anthony Hall, Delta Psi. It had meetings, you know, secret meetings
29 which were mainly literary to nature like the secret society. So, it wasn't just a frat house.

30 RV: How did you get into that? What were their criteria?

1 RP: I don't know, I was asked to join. You had the option of enjoying St.
2 Anthony Hall which was the only fraternity like that on the campus or waiting until your
3 junior year and then being tapped by the senior society like Skull and Bones.

4 RV: Were you a member of Skull and Bones?

5 RP: You couldn't be if you were in St. Anthony Hall.

6 RV: Which was considered more prestigious?

7 RP: Oh, probably Skull and Bones was the most prestigious, but St. Anthony was
8 well respected and then later on when Yale abolished all fraternities it was the only one
9 that remained. Now they've let them back on campus. So, it had a serious side, so I guess
10 that's where some evidence of leadership started to emerge. I was elected president of St.
11 Anthony Hall. I was on the fraternity inner council and other stuff like that. So, I had a
12 great time at Yale.

13 RV: It sounds like you had a really full life there.

14 RP: Oh yeah, I did.

15 RV: I mean, in a very different rural Virginia.

16 RP: (Laughing) That's pretty inviolate.

17 RV: Yes, it is.

18 RP: Back in those days, of course, I was kidded a lot about that. The old business
19 of coming from the south was—people expected you to not only have a Southern accent,
20 but, you know, you were just different. So that was a lot of fun poking fun.

21 RV: But obviously your classmates, your colleagues respected you in the sense
22 they saw something in you.

23 RP: I guess they respected me. I remember a bunch of guys in my sophomore year
24 they took me skiing and I had never been on skis.

25 RV: This is snow skiing?

26 RP: Yeah, snow skiing. I went up to Conway, New Hampshire which is a favorite
27 ski resort, so I said, "You're going to show me how to do this?" and they said, "Sure."
28 So, we rented some skis and boots. Back then those skis were big wooden things that
29 were stiff, heavy, and hard to handle. You were practically strapped into them; you could
30 hardly get out of them. They took me up to the top of the mountain and I said, "Well,
31 what do I do?" and he said, "You zig this way and zig that way and this is how you turn."

1 They shoved me off. I survived somehow and they thought it was funny, you know, back
2 then you thought you were indestructible. And so, I survived that experience. I did learn
3 how to ski moderately. So, you know, I couldn't ice skate, a lot of them could ice skate.

4 RV: What about your social life at Yale? Tell me about that.

5 RP: Well, you know, it was an all-male school so when you got time you sort of
6 met girls by going to girl's colleges. Somebody knew somebody and so you had a lot of
7 blind dates, and it was strictly a weekend thing. And then there were big things like there
8 was a mid-winter's sort of cotillion, but you know, big dances and then there was Derby
9 Day in the spring when the race against Harvard was held on the Housatonic. Everybody
10 went down there and watched the race and drank too much beer. You know, rallies after
11 football games and, you know. There was a fair amount of social activity in the fraternity
12 itself, but as I say, it was a weekend thing when you could get the time. You learned how
13 to socialize.

14 RV: St. Anthony Hall, you said you all would have literary meetings, is that
15 correct?

16 RP: Yes.

17 RV: Can you describe what that kind of meeting was?

18 RP: Well, they had a ritual to the opening of the meeting, and it was in a secret
19 side of the fraternity. The fraternity house was a building donated by Vanderbilt and it
20 was quite an elaborate structure. The fraternity had rights very similar to the Masons and
21 then you were expected to speak at these meetings and to present papers and to write
22 literary things and present them. And then they would discuss and so, you know, it had an
23 added a dimension to things.

24 RV: How did you do with that? Did you see yourself flourishing in that
25 atmosphere or?

26 RP: I think so, yeah, Mm-hmm. It was intellectually challenging, you had to get
27 up and voice your opinions and learn how to speak on your feet. So, I think it was very
28 helpful to me.

29 RV: Rufus, is there a time when you can look back and see, "This is when I was
30 really coming into my element." Was it at Woodberry, was it at Yale, or did it come
31 later?

1 RP: I think it was probably in both places. You know, it was just kind of an
2 evolution.

3 RV: Did you know what you wanted to do with yourself? You said you were a
4 history major.

5 RP: No, I didn't. You know, here we were in the atmosphere of the Cold War.
6 The Koreans were starting somewhere in '50. I remember my classmates were in ROTC
7 (Reserve Officer Training Corps). A couple of them went through officer training and
8 went off to Korea, several guys did. Everybody thought that we'd probably be at war
9 with the—the majority thought we'd probably be at war with the Soviet Union. Either
10 you were going to be drafted or you volunteered, or you went into the CIA which had a
11 very active recruitment program going on.

12 RV: Was that recruitment out in the open or was it—how would you describe it?

13 RP: Well, they usually sent recruiters to Yale, nobody advertised it. You received
14 a kind of—I didn't get a letter, it was more—somebody informing me that there was
15 somebody from the US government on the campus and they liked to interview you. So, it
16 was kind of mysterious. You had somebody say, "I think it's the CIA." But we weren't
17 sure. Lots of guys said, "Sure, I'll be interviewed." I mean, it was an idea of you were
18 expected to perform military service or public service of some kind. You would be
19 deferred if you went on to graduate school, but, you know, it was there, and you'd have
20 to serve eventually.

21 RV: Where did that expectation come from?

22 RP: I think it came from the climb of the times from the fact there was the draft,
23 from the fact that we were now at war in Korea. I mean, it was called a police action.
24 Everybody understood that it was a war, you know, in which we were opposing the
25 communist take over of Korea. There was the Berlin Airlift in '48, you know, we were in
26 a continuous sense of crisis, of stopping the aggression of the Soviet Union. And so that
27 was just kind of accept. There didn't seem to be too much pro-Wallace sentiment on
28 campus. Undoubtedly, there were some, but that was not shared in general student body. I
29 wouldn't say that the student body was not all that supportive of Truman as a person, but
30 certainly supportive of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan and certainly standing
31 up to the North Koreans and Korea.

1 RV: What did you think of Harry Truman?

2 RP: Well, I didn't know what to make of him. And then he fired MacArthur and I
3 think that I share the initial impression that that was the wrong thing to do. Because I
4 didn't really know the details and MacArthur was such a hero from World War II. After I
5 knew more about it, of course, I changed my mind. I was not active politically on campus
6 particularly because I was involved with so many other things. Anyway, I got
7 interviewed by the CIA along with lots of other classmates. I guess they identified me as
8 a candidate for military training because first of all, there was a big program when the
9 CIA was engaged in training, immigrants from Eastern Europe to go back in and operate,
10 run guerillas behind Russian lines on the assumption that the Russians were going to
11 invade Germany.

12 RV: What was that interview like?

13 RP: Well, you know, he identified himself as being from the CIA. He said, "I
14 would ask you not to talk about this interview." And then he asked me about my
15 background, what my interests were. So, the key question was, would you be willing to
16 jump behind enemy lines? And of course, that was a challenge and I said yes. And so, I
17 was on their list for recruitment, but then my parents implored me to go to law school at
18 the University of Virginia, so I agreed to try out law.

19 RV: So, you told the CIA no.

20 RP: Well, I told them that I'd let them know and I did let them know that I was
21 going to law school, but I remained interested. So, then I tried out law school for a half a
22 year and was frankly bored by it.

23 RV: This is in Charlottesville at UVA?

24 RP: Yup. So, my closest friend had gone into the agency and had gone through
25 prime military training and was promptly shipped off to Korea and I knew he was doing
26 exciting things in Korea. And so, after the first semester I got a hold of the CIA much to
27 my parent's disappointment and said I wanted to join.

28 RV: Okay, what year did you graduate Yale?

29 RP: 1951.

30 RV: Okay and UVA was again '51? That fall?

1 RP: Yeah, the fall and then in February I told him I was not going to come back. I
2 was recruited by the CIA, but then it took several months for them to get my clearance
3 and what I did was stayed at home in Alexandria and go to the congressional library and
4 read everything they gave me. They gave me a huge list of books to read about
5 communism, including all the works of Stalin and Lenin among others.

6 RV: Yeah, I was going to say, do you remember what was on that list?

7 RP: Well, I don't remember all the books, but.

8 RV: In general.

9 RP: Well, it was every conceivable book that had been written about communism.
10 It must have been four or five pages long. And so, I struggled through Lenin, Stalin was
11 worse. It'd been read books by ex-communists, Arthur Kessler, and so what that did was
12 give me a basic knowledge of the enemy that I would be facing.

13 RV: So, it was very clear to you that communism was the enemy, the legitimate
14 enemy.

15 RP: Yeah, yeah.

16 RV: And the state of the Cold War, kind of the feeling of the Cold War, very real
17 that this point.

18 RP: Oh yeah. A lot of people were dying in Korea and so it certainly was.

19 RV: I think that people today have hard time understanding what that climate was
20 like, especially there in the early 1950s. How would you describe the United States
21 climate in the 1950s?

22 RP: Well, I think it was certainly more cohesive than it is now. You know, of
23 course there was a lot of discipline. There was, you know, the left wing of the
24 Democratic Party headed by Henry Wallace and really wanted to cooperate and so that
25 was the way to deal with the Soviet Union, but I think the majority opinion was that they
26 had to be confronted and stopped. The policy was containment, but it was aggressive
27 containment. You know, the republicans were more isolationists in their approach to
28 things, but there was a lot of common support across the board for the marshal plan, for
29 point four, for intervening Korea initially and started to fall apart after the war kept
30 grinding on in a stalemate. So, we all shared in this and it was also, I think, coming out of
31 World War II there was a sense of purpose that we didn't want this to happen again, that

1 we didn't want some dictator to start taking over other countries and it was very clear that
2 the Soviet Union was expansive and had taken over Poland and Czechoslovakia and had
3 been responsible for murdering the leader of Czechoslovakia and, you know, they had to
4 be stopped and now you're in Greece and defeated the kind of parties had to be defeated
5 in France and Italy. You know, so that was just a part of the ethos of the time. And it was,
6 you know, the draft was on; there was a sense of sacrifice which hung over from World
7 War II in a sense of common purpose.

8 RV: What did you believe personally about communism at that time in the early
9 fifties before going into the CIA?

10 RP: Well, you know, I believed that it was wrong and murderous and evil. You
11 know, just a doctrine that led to people being enslaved and we could not let it succeed.
12 So, it was the same thing as stopping Hitler. It was just a continuation.

13 RV: Was it surprising to you that the Soviet Union, our ally in World War II
14 became our enemy?

15 RP: No, not particularly because you could see the evolution of things. I didn't
16 believe the recriminations of McCarthy and others, you know, about that we collaborated
17 with them and therefore somehow, we had tainted ourselves and undercut ourselves in
18 terms of proposing. I didn't pay much attention to those arguments.

19 RV: You didn't buy into the McCarthy arguments?

20 RP: No, no, not at all.

21 RV: Did you and I guess your friends, your closest friends; did you all see this
22 guy as more of a loudmouth? Not really credible?

23 RP: Yeah, kind of a demagog and then I had the example of my Uncle Dean out
24 in Cincinnati.

25 RV: What happened with him?

26 RP: Oh, McCarthy came to Middletown to give a speech; he was going around
27 the country giving speeches. He has probably just a list of subversive organizations,
28 anybody who belonged to those organizations, you know, was either a communist or a
29 fellow traveler. Some of them had to do with the Civil War in Spain and anyway, so
30 McCarthy came and gave his speech. It was rabble rousing, "We got communists in our
31 mitts, they've penetrated the federal government, and nobody cares except me. I'll tell

1 you I got a list." And on and on. So, at the end of it he took some questions and my Uncle
2 Dean got up and said, "Do you maintain that anybody who was a member of any of the
3 named organization was either a communist or fellow traveler?" and McCarthy said,
4 "Yes, absolutely." And he said, "Were you aware that George Varity, the President of
5 Armco Steel, at one time, was a member?" and that just flattened him.

6 RV: Flattened McCarthy?

7 RP: Yeah! He was this icon of maybe the third or fourth largest steel company in
8 the world and the main industry of Middletown Ohio where they coal plant and was
9 supposedly a communist.

10 RV: What did McCarthy do?

11 RP: I think he just, "Well, I didn't mean anything." He tried to extricate himself,
12 but there's no way he could. So, my uncle just deflated him.

13 RV: How did you hear about that?

14 RP: Oh, it was a story. It went around the family pretty quickly.

15 RV: Well, I wanted to ask you another question about the climate, about the
16 times. You talked about Truman a bit and you talk about the Cold War. I'm interested,
17 after reading Lenin, I take it you read Marx and Ingles.

18 RP: Yeah, well that was just kind of background, but the real key to understand
19 communism in its present form; when I say present form, I mean present form at that
20 time was Leninism and how it was applied in an old dictatorship of the proletariat and
21 how a small group of people had to run things with absolute power in order to achieve
22 this eventual millennium. And therefore, what communism was, was really a practical
23 means of gaining power by whatever means and then maintaining yourself in absolute
24 power. Human beings were just cogs in a machine and that materialism and the fact that
25 it suppressed people's liberties and on and on and on.

26 RB: Right. Well for you, how did Dwight Eisenhower enter the picture and fit
27 into this world? I mean he becomes president there in 1953 and he's sworn into office.

28 RP: Yeah, by that time I was already, you know.

29 RV: You were in.

30 RP: Well, I was in the agency, then I was in the Army and that's a whole other
31 story.

1 RV: Right.

2 RP: And so, you know, he really, other than achieving the truce in Korea was just
3 as strong, if not stronger facing communism. In fact, you know, they've developed the
4 approach of rolling it back which, of course, we didn't back up when the Hungarians
5 revolted. So, you know, the lines were being drawn. And then of course they got drawn in
6 Southeast Asia.

7 RV: You're right. What did you know about the CIA before you joined it in
8 1952?

9 RP: Not much. I knew something from my friends, you know, nobody admitted
10 that you were a member of the CIA, you worked for the Defense Department, but it was
11 kind of a joke, but that's what you said, and nobody asked you otherwise. I knew from
12 them that, indirectly, that—and they didn't tell me much either until I got cleared. That
13 they were going through training and, you know, when you said jump behind enemy
14 lines, you assume you were being trained to do that kind of stuff or to do espionage work
15 against the Soviets.

16 RV: Did it sound exciting to you at the time?

17 RP: Oh yeah, sure, even romantic. And there by that time some knowledge of the
18 OSS (Office of Strategic Services) and its exploits during World War II had become
19 public knowledge.

20 RV: Right, I was going to ask you, did you all know about the OSS and what it
21 had done.

22 RP: Yeah, we didn't know a lot of the details, but we knew that they played a
23 role, we knew about the resistance in France, we knew that people had dropped in and
24 helped the resistance and that was all part of World War II.

25 RV: What would you rate the level of intellectualism within the CIA right there
26 when you first got in? Was it an intellectual endeavor or were they real practical?

27 RP: Well, it was a combination of both, but you had a lot of brilliant people. A lot
28 of them have been recruited out of Ivy League colleges, but they weren't all Ivy League
29 by any matter on means. I went in and went through some initial intelligence training,
30 kind of a basic intelligence course and then I went for paramilitary training down toward
31 Camp Peary which is on the peninsula, Virginia peninsula. You know, that was about six

1 months of very intensive training and all kinds of forms of sabotage, running agent's nets,
2 recruiting, carrying out rage, explosives, weapons, you name it. Everything you would
3 need to know if you were either running guerillas or advising guerillas or were a guerilla
4 yourself.

5 RV: Rufus, before we go there I kind of want to talk in detail about that. Before
6 that, what did you tell your parents? Did you say, "I'm going into the agency?"

7 RP: Yeah.

8 RV: You made it very clear what you were doing?

9 RP: Yeah, sure, but then I didn't tell them anything.

10 RV: Sure, what was their reaction?

11 RP: I told them that my cover was that I was joining the Defense Department so
12 that if they were asked what I was doing, they were to say that I was working for the
13 Defense Department.

14 RV: How did they feel about this?

15 RP: They didn't feel good at all. They felt this was a romantic notion that I should
16 pursue my education and, you know, and maybe I'd have to take some military service,
17 get it over with. It would be preferably in the Air Force even if my eyes weren't good
18 enough to be a pilot, but you know.

19 RV: Were they supportive in the sense that we don't like the decision, but we're
20 going to support you, nonetheless?

21 RP: Oh sure, I lived at home and yeah.

22 RV: Okay, okay. Rufus let's take a break.

23 RP: They didn't throw me out.

24 RV: I wouldn't expect they would. I mean, you're their only son and you've done
25 quite well it seems after this point.

26 RP: That's admiration, yeah.

27 RV: Yes, let's take a break for a minute, Rufus. You ready to go?

28 RP: Yeah.

29 RV: Okay. Okay Rufus, continuing now, tell me a little bit about getting into the
30 CIA. What is that step by step process? You're recruited at Yale, you do this, I guess, is it
31 a relatively brief interview that you did at Yale?

1 RP: Yeah.

2 RV: Okay. And then you say, "Yeah, I'm doing this, but yes I'm still interested
3 possibly for the future." And then you go. You here from them in the interim?

4 RP: No, I didn't I contacted them. I was given a contact, a point of contact that I
5 could contact.

6 RV: Was that someone within Washington D.C?

7 RP: Yeah, I had a Defense Department number.

8 RV: Okay.

9 RP: And so, I called them and told them that if they still wanted me, I was
10 interested. So, they called me back and said yes. And then they gave me a long, long,
11 long, extremely detailed form to fill out for my security clearance.

12 RV: Right.

13 RP: Which you had to detail every place you'd lived, address, you know. And that
14 took some time to get all that information together and submit it to them.

15 RV: What kind of questions?

16 RP: Well, if you acquainted with—if anybody's acquainted with clearance
17 procedures in the US Government.

18 RV: And most people are not familiar with that. So, what does that entail?

19 RP: Well, that entails providing them with every conceivable bit of information
20 about your background, where you lived, where you went to school, who your neighbors
21 were because, you know, they're going to check you out, they're going to go talk to your
22 neighbors. They're going to talk to people that you knew, you get references. As I say,
23 it's extremely detailed. And then, of course they review that document and people come
24 around, do interviews, they do a field check on you.

25 RV: What do you mean by that?

26 RP: Well, field check means they go interview people that knew you; they may
27 interview people that you don't put on the form. They'll ask somebody, "Well, is there
28 somebody else that knew him well?" and then they'll go talk to that person. They'll talk
29 to neighbors, and they'll ask them questions about, you know, "What do you know about
30 this person, do you ever hear this person expressing the opinions in favor of communism
31 or against the United States?" all kinds of questions like that.

1 RV: Did you call the neighbors and say, "Hey, this is what's coming?"

2 RP: No.

3 RV: Okay. Did you hear from the neighbors later that, "Oh yeah, we were
4 visited." Did they tell you about that?

5 RP: I can't recall about that, really.

6 RV: Okay, so they did the field check, and they review the form, they make all
7 that.

8 RP: And then eventually, you know if you check out okay, they give you a
9 clearance.

10 RV: Now, are you graded on how you check out? Are there levels to how well
11 people check out?

12 RP: No, its just you pass a certain test in terms of, you know, they're also
13 checking out that you have an arrest record. Are you known to drink? Do you drink too
14 much? Has anybody seen you drunk? You know every conceivable thing about what kind
15 of person that you are and how reliable you are. It's not also whether you might have any
16 connections with communists, with the Communist Party, but also, you know are you
17 reliable, what's your character?

18 RV: Sure.

19 RP: And so, it takes a long time. In my case, it took several months.

20 RV: And you were in Alexandria while this was going on?

21 RP: Yeah.

22 RV: Okay, so if someone sees you drunk five times is that going to disqualify you
23 necessarily? They say, "Oh yeah I saw Rufus."

24 RP: If you're a habitual drunk.

25 RV: Well, right, but if it's just a high school party here, I heard at this house.

26 RP: No, of course not.

27 RV: Okay.

28 RP: And they ask you, yourself, you know. You also— let me think, I probably
29 got interviewed too, and asked questions. So, then they test, you know, what you say
30 against what other people may say about you.

31 RV: Did you do a lie detector test?

1 RP: I did eventually, yes.

2 RV: Okay. Who were the people asking you these questions?

3 RP: The agency was the only outfit in government that gave lie detector tests.

4 RV: Right, that's why I asked that. Who are these people interviewing you? What

5 are they like? How are they dressed; how did they treat you?

6 RP: Well, they treat you with courtesy, they're conservatively dressed, I mean, it

7 still goes on.

8 RV: Sure.

9 RP: The usual, you know, they're not, and I don't know how to put it. They're

10 just people asking questions. Not, you know, police giving the third degree.

11 RV: The process was—

12 RP: It was methodical and as thorough as they could make it.

13 RV: Okay. And when you're in, what do they tell you?

14 RP: Well, once you get cleared, you know, then you come in, you take an oath of

15 office.

16 RV: Where'd you go? Did you go to Langley?

17 RP: Well, there was no office in Langley. All the agency was down in temporary

18 buildings on the mall.

19 RV: Do you remember which building you went to?

20 RP: No, I don't. I mean, the building's gone now. They were all temporary

21 buildings built for World War II. They had window air conditioning units that didn't

22 always function very well, linoleum floors. I mean, it was, you know, so as far as office

23 space concerned it wasn't too exciting. The kind of place you didn't want to spend too

24 much time in if you didn't have to.

25 RV: Maybe that was the point; they wanted you out in the field. See, you're

26 sworn in, what was the oath of office like? What did you have to swear to?

27 RP: It's the same kind of oath of office that you take when you become an officer

28 in the United States Army, we'd uphold the constitution and defend the United States of

29 America.

30 RV: Were you by yourself or was there a class or a group of people?

1 RP: No, no you were sworn individually. And then you had to sign agreements
2 never to reveal secret information, et cetera. And that's been relaxed, but in those days, it
3 meant that you weren't to reveal that you worked for the agency period.

4 RV: Did they make that really clear to you?

5 RP: Oh yeah. It was a lifetime kind of thing.

6 RV: Really? So how did that change? I mean, were you told at some point, "Yeah,
7 its okay to talk about the fact that you were—"

8 RP: Well, gradually, you know, the CIA emerged from the shadows and then
9 there were the hearings and so, you know, people admitting that they worked for CIA
10 and, you know, revealing more details that have been revealed in countless books become
11 generally pretty well accepted. I will still, should under the rules in which I was recruited
12 clear that part of my book which has to do with my service for the CIA.

13 RV: You have to or?

14 RP: I'm still on an obligation to do that.

15 RV: Okay. And regard to this interview, did you have to think about making sure
16 that you could talk about your life and your career?

17 RP: Yes, you know, in the general sense the main thing that they don't want you
18 to talk about are some of the intelligence methods, some of the technology, or to reveal
19 code names that were used because everybody had a synonym in the communications
20 that were used, stuff like that.

21 RV: What was your synonym?

22 RP: I don't even remember.

23 RV: Okay.

24 RP: Anyway, if I did, I wouldn't tell you.

25 RV: (Laughing) I suspected that you would say that.

26 RP: The reason is that, you know, the one-time pads were used, they were general
27 communication and presumably somebody could go back, all the way back and
28 reconstruct a lot of what was going on, you know, because you could pick up where it
29 made a reference to a particular kind of code name.

30 RV: Absolutely, yeah.

1 RP: A lot of what I'm talking about has been published in one form or
2 another.

3 RV: Yes, it has. What else are you agreeing to? Not to reveal you were in the
4 agency, not to reveal methods, technologies, names, you swear in your allegiance to the
5 United States et cetera. What else are they telling you?

6 RP: Well, I don't recall much more than that.

7 RV: Okay, okay.

8 RP: Then they're giving you instructions and intelligence operations and methods.

9 RV: Okay, so were you assigned an office, or did they say, "Okay, you're not off
10 to Camp Peary?"

11 RP: I went almost immediately into training.

12 RV: To Camp Peary?

13 RP: No, up here initially.

14 RV: Okay.

15 RP: Just kind of an introductory orientation.

16 RV: And where was that held?

17 RP: It was in some temp building in Washington.

18 RV: Okay, and is this kind of a history of what the OSS and CIA?

19 RP: It was a little history, but then there was a lot of emphasis on trade craft.

20 RV: Okay. Can you discuss any of that or not?

21 RP: Well, I don't think it's worth while. It was standard stuff, so you read any
22 number of novels, or you read books that have been written about the agency. A lot of the
23 stuff published about the OSS, you know, it's just standard stuff about how you recruit
24 agents, how you run agents, how you set up dead drops, how you communicate, how you
25 conduct an interrogation, how you resist interrogation, and on and on.

26 RV: How did you take to all of this information?

27 RP: Well, I found it interesting and, you know, I was anxious to get on with it.
28 This is kind of a first step. I was really looking forward to paramilitary training.

29 RV: How long does this initial training last?

30 RP: About a month.

31 RV: Okay. And were you competent in your abilities to kind of absorb all this?

1 RP: Well, I apparently was, yeah.

2 RV: Well, that's good. So, after a month then you based at Camp Peary for the
3 paramilitary. And you said this was six months?

4 RP: Yeah, I'm trying to decide now; I need to really get a point of reference there.
5 It was either four or six.

6 RV: Okay.

7 RP: I think it was six.

8 RV: Okay, do you remember when this is in 1952?

9 RP: Yeah, lets see, I think it began in April.

10 RV: And so, in May are you off to Camp Peary or in June?

11 RP: Yeah, May.

12 RV: Tell me where Camp Peary's located again? They're in Virginia.

13 RP: Yeah, it's down in the peninsula not too far from Newport News, you know,
14 that whole area there where Camp Peary is.

15 RV: Okay, so the six month training, can you tell me about, you know what that
16 is? The paramilitary training?

17 RP: Yeah, its pretty standard stuff. It's the same kind of training that was given to
18 OSS agents that were flown into France. You learned how to jump out of a plane, you
19 actually did jumps. You learned explosives, you learned secret communication to learn an
20 operation radio, learn how to do morse code, learned how to induct military operations,
21 cross terrain at night explosive. You fired weapons; you learned how to deal with a
22 variety of weapons. You know, machine guns, rifles, mortars, what have you. You know,
23 I have to recruit people. You organized exercises, ran raids, did all those kinds of things
24 that, you know, you would be expected to do if you were running guerilla operations.
25 Also, preparing you to become an instructor in these operations.

26 RV: Okay, can you give me some examples of the training? Say, how to recruit
27 people?

28 RP: I can give you, you know, more details probably on just standard military
29 stuff. Well, it wasn't standard, but you were expected, for example, on one exercise to go
30 across terrain using nothing but a compass and a small unit undetected through various or
31 around various checkpoints to blow up a naval installation which was simulated, but

1 explosives weren't simulated nor was the water. You'd swim out and attach explosives to
2 a ship which was just the raft built on a fifty five gallon drum and blew it up. If you made
3 it all the way through, you know that kind of operation.

4 RV: How did you do in all this?

5 RP: Well, I guess I did okay. My roommate was a guy named Tony Poshepny
6 who became very famous as an advisor to the Hmong in Laos later on.

7 RV: Tell me about the relationships within the class. How many were there and
8 was it all male?

9 RP: Yeah, oh sure.

10 RV: Yeah.

11 RP: In those days. And we had a variety of people, but everybody had some
12 athletic ability and some of them were really extraordinary. We had one guy that came
13 close to being an all-American. We had one guy who was part Indian who played for
14 Oklahoma. He was the most incredible damn athlete I've ever seen.

15 RV: Really, how so?

16 RP: Well, there were various things on this athletic course including a fifteen foot
17 wall that you had to figure out how to get up enough speed to run up so you could grab
18 the top and go over it.

19 RV: Wow.

20 RP: And not everybody could make it. He made it look easy and he could go up a
21 rope hand over hand faster than you could come down it practically. I mean, its just
22 unbelievable. I navigated the obstacle course.

23 RV: How did you do on the athletic training?

24 RP: I did pretty well, but I never could get to the top of that wall.

25 RV: So, what kind of relationships did you all have within the group?

26 RP: Well, we really bonded pretty closely as we worked together on operations.
27 There were quite a variety of guys, you know, all of them were college educated, but
28 coming from very different backgrounds.

29 RV: Were they mainly your age, early twenties?

30 RP: Yeah.

31 RV: Okay.

1 RP: Some were a little older. Tony, let's see; he would have been about four years
2 older than I. He had been an eighteen year old marine on Iwo Jima.

3 RV: Wow.

4 RP: Instead of going to college thereafter, got a GI Bill and then had been
5 recruited by the agency.

6 RV: Okay. Were you all allowed to talk to each other openly about your past,
7 your backgrounds and who you were?

8 RP: We weren't restrained as I remember deliberately, but yeah, that was fine
9 because we weren't going to be deep cover agents, we were going to be either trainers or
10 we were, you know, going to be under official cover of some kind. So, that was a
11 different kind of a situation. You know, there's a common thing about calling people to
12 work for the agency spies, but the agency people who are under official cover were not
13 spies. They recruited spies, they ran spies, but they were not spies.

14 RV: What was the most interesting thing about the training for you? Do you
15 remember a particular incident or a particular account?

16 RP: Well, I think just some of the training exercises. Whether you were able to
17 pull them off successfully and it was exciting. It was fun blowing things up.

18 RV: I could imagine so.

19 RP: Oh yeah, yeah.

20 RV: I mean, this is the first time you—

21 RP: It's a pyromaniac to some mostly boys.

22 RV: This is the first time you've really done that.

23 RP: Yeah, except for fireworks.

24 RV: Sure.

25 RP: Father loved fireworks, so. We would always have a pretty good assortment
26 of pretty live fireworks.

27 RV: What was the hardest thing about the training?

28 RP: Oh, I think some of the physical demands. I don't think it was that
29 challenging intellectually.

30 RV: Was there classroom work?

31 RP: Yeah, field exercise.

1 RV: Who were your instructors?

2 RP: Oh, some guys that had been in OSS who had been—either that or they'd
3 been trained, and they been instructors in, you know, various secret installations in
4 Europe and then come back. Mainly they were former OSS type.

5 RV: Were they able to talk about some of their operations they did?

6 RP: Oh sure, yeah. You know, "This is how you'd do this." And then they'd
7 illustrate it.

8 RV: Were they good?

9 RP: Yeah, by in large.

10 RV: Where did you all live? I mean, were you in a barracks type situation?

11 RP: Yeah, uh-huh, yeah.

12 RV: Okay, and is it a military atmosphere or is it more relaxed, kind of a
13 civilian/military atmosphere?

14 RP: Yeah, more civilian/military.

15 RV: Okay, what was your clothing? Did you have to wear a uniform everyday?

16 RP: No. Well, you had fatigues, but you're expected to—you had laundry you
17 expect to keep them clean, but you were distinctly not, you know, in a uniform service.

18 RV: Could you leave Camp Peary and take time away?

19 RP: No.

20 RV: Okay, so you were there—

21 RP: We were out of sight and out of mind.

22 RV: You were there six months straight?

23 RP: Yeah.

24 RV: When you think back about this time, Rufus, what do you see in your mind's
25 eye? What do you think about Camp Peary? What's the first thing, you see?

26 RP: I see some of the terrain; it's very flat, a lot of pine trees, and a lot of water
27 ways cutting through it. It's more an impression of a forest and then some of the roads
28 that would cut through, so you'd figure out how to delay an ambush on the road. How to
29 set explosives so that they would cut trees and block a road, so I have an image of that, I
30 have an image of what the obstacle course looked like. Those are the images that stick in
31 my mind.

1 RV: Do you remember the financial arrangement and what you all were paid?
2 RP: Well, it wasn't very much, I know that.
3 RV: I was gonna say was it a good pay base or not?
4 RP: No, I'd say probably, you know, probably four or five thousand dollars a year
5 or something.

6 RV: Okay.

7 RP: So, when did you find out after or as you're going through the training, I
8 guess toward the end of the training, when are you finding out when your assignments
9 will be and where you'll go next?

10 RV: Oh, towards the end. Okay and I assume they assigned each of you to
11 different tasks according to how you performed in the training?

12 RP: I suppose, and it also depended on what positions were available. So, I would
13 have preferred to go out and join some of my friends who are already out in the Korean
14 theatre, but by that time they pretty well filled those. And then an alternative was to go to
15 Germany and be involved in training. Immigrants from Germany, they had a big training
16 installation in Germany and so that was my assignment.

17 RV: Did you have any choice in the matter?

18 RP: Well, sure. I mean you could ask what the alternatives were, but that was the
19 only alternative that seemed to get one readily out of Washington. And after the training
20 and after being around watching them before that, you didn't want to hang around. There
21 was no point in hanging around. You know, these (inaudible). And so, I that was my
22 assignment and I started learning German.

23 RV: Were you able to visit your parents?

24 RP: Yeah, once I got pack to Washington, sure.

25 RV: How much time did you have before you had to leave?

26 RP: Well, I didn't leave because after I started taking German, the identity of this
27 training base in Germany was blown and so they had to close it down. But then I didn't
28 really have a job, I was sort of wondering the halls. I could have gone, I suppose, gotten
29 an overseas assignment back in the intelligence side of the agency and that didn't seem
30 very attractive. I had the question of military service hanging over my head. As long as I
31 was working for the agency, I was exempt, of course. But then I felt that, well, maybe I

1 should go into military service. So, I talked to the agency, and they had an arrangement
2 whereby you could resign from the agency, enlist in the Army. Elect to go through basic
3 training then elect to go through OCS (Officer Candidate School) if you redeemed
4 qualified on the basis of your basic training. And then if you graduated from OCS, the
5 agency would have you detailed back to them. And that improved your chances. I mean,
6 now you were a military officer. It got your service out of the way and also I think I was
7 motivated to do something by the fact that one of my best friends from college, a guy
8 named Jack Downy was shot down by the Chinese communists over Manchuria, flying a
9 mission where he was picking up some Chinese agents and he was captured by the
10 Chinese, put on a show trial and I felt like I should be doing something in the war effort,
11 something more active than just being a civilian. So, I suppose that entered my
12 motivation. Anyway, I did resign, I was inducted at Ft. Mead, went through basic training
13 at [Ft.] Indiantown Gap. I went to Officer Candidate School in Ft. Benning, graduated.
14 This was all during '53, graduated as a second lieutenant (2LT). I went through military
15 jump training so I could get jump pay which was an extra one hundred dollars a month
16 which meant something then because, you know, second lieutenant only got about three
17 thousand dollars a year, something like three or four thousand.

18 RV: Yeah, that's pretty significant.

19 RP: Yeah, and then I found myself back in Washington. I was detailed to the
20 Defense Department extensively and then I got an assignment to go out to Korea and I
21 was detailed to a rescue unit out there, but I was working for the station and my job was
22 to disassemble an operation they had which was some Koreans who ran a printing press
23 and printed leaflets, and these leaflets were sent over North Korea by balloon and
24 dropped out of a balloon. The balloon would get to a certain altitude and then
25 automatically release these leaflets. That was part of the propaganda campaign, but of
26 course that stopped with the armistice in November of '53 and the there was nothing for
27 them to do so I had to, unfortunately, engage in the termination of the Korean employees,
28 pack up the printing plant, ship it back to the US and that wasn't too happy a job, but
29 anyway.

30 RV: When was this, Rufus?

31 RP: This was in the spring of '54.

1 RV: Okay.

2 RP: This gets me to the point in which I get contacted to go to South Vietnam.

3 RV: Yes, and you go there in August of 1954.

4 RP: That's right, yeah.

5 RV: Do you have anything that you want to talk about regarding basic training
6 and advance at Ft. Benning?

7 RP: No, not really, I mean, the Indiantown Gap was, I think, a very good basic
8 training site because it was colder than hell up there and it kind of imitated the conditions
9 in Korea. And then some of our guys went on and didn't go to OCS, went directly to
10 Korea.

11 RV: Right.

12 RP: Because the war was still going on. It was a stalemate, but people were up on
13 the front lines. We had a lot of veterans who came back and who were running the
14 course, so it was pretty realistic and pretty taxing physically. I was chosen to be the
15 commandant of my particular training group. Anyway, then I went to OCS which was—I
16 found pretty tough initially because my temperament was not suited to the more
17 harassing details of how, you know, the Army treated the people, you know, break them
18 down.

19 RV: Right.

20 RP: I was just naturally resistant to this so in a way I fought that for awhile, but
21 then I guess I got used to it and did pretty well.

22 RV: Did any of your instructors know that you were a former agency?

23 RP: No, nobody talked about it.

24 RV: And I assume you were able to get through all the training physically, you
25 know, in really good shape. After going through the six month paramilitary course, I
26 would imagine that you were ready for (inaudible).

27 RP: I was in pretty good physical condition and then going through basic training,
28 I mean, they really put you through it.

29 RV: Yes.

30 RP: We had to run up and down that mountain in Indiantown Gap a lot and we
31 went on long marches and had exercises. They had one fun exercise, I got picked by one

1 of the— we had reconnaissance aircraft, you know, as part of this exercise. The flyer was
2 in that river, the second or first lieutenant (1LT) had served in Korea and so we had fun.
3 We had sacks of flour that we would use like bombs, you know? And our main targets
4 were the tactical officers, you know? So, we could hit them.

5 RV: And what happened?

6 RP: Nothing, we just dived bombed wherever we'd see troopers were supposed to
7 take cover and use some camouflage. Well, we'd catch them in the open, you know?
8 We'd just dive bomb them and hit them with sacks of flour.

9 RV: Okay, what else about the Advanced and Ft. Benning? I've heard lots of
10 stories about the difficulty.

11 RP: I wound up with a lot of respect for that training. They really did teach you
12 now, not just to perform technically, but how to lead a platoon and, you know, a lot of it
13 was by road, but they really ran you around. By the end of that training, I mean, you were
14 pretty worn out. I remember one guy brought a car down which you're allowed to do in
15 about the last week before graduation. I was driving it to Columbus and went to sleep
16 right in the middle of the afternoon. You got up at five in the morning and you went, you
17 know, to lights out which were ten o'clock and that was everyday of the week. And so,
18 you learned how to go to sleep instantly.

19 RV: Right, how were your leadership skills developing?

20 RP: I guess okay.

21 RV: Well, it seems like they're more than okay because, well first chosen for the
22 agency, but after that, you go into the regular army, and you're chosen as the
23 commandant for your class or your group.

24 RP: Yeah, in basic training.

25 RV: Yes, and then you get to Benning. What kind of leader are you at this point in
26 your life?

27 RP: That's a good question. You know, I don't think about that. Your kind of just
28 what you are. I seemed to do well when I was leading various exercises. I did not wind up
29 at the top of my class and part was an early kind of a rebellious attitude. I did extremely
30 well academically. I think I was about ninth or something because there was a class rank.
31 Anyway, I got through it without slugging anybody.

1 RV: Were you a verbal leader or a more watch me do this in action type leader?
2 RP: Probably more watch me, you know. You were expected to be a person of
3 few words and affective action and lead by example. That was the motto. And then I went
4 through jump training again.

5 RV: Right, right, to get the extra pay?

6 RP: Yeah, and that was fun.

7 RV: I was going to say did you enjoy that?

8 RP: Yes, I did.

9 RV: What was it that you did enjoy about that?

10 RP: Well, the excitement at jumping, but there was a lot of—you know, they
11 really drove you and you get a lot of comradely in the unit that you're training with, and
12 it was a sustained level of excitement and then I was pretty athletic even though I was
13 heavy which meant that you hit the ground harder than most people. Everything went fine
14 and I really liked it, and I enjoyed it.

15 RV: Tell me what your parents thought about all of this.

16 RP: Well, my father wasn't in favor of the infantry at all. His was a World War
17 opinion, "they're cannon fodder" and so he wasn't happy about that at all, but, you know,
18 I had my reasons.

19 RV: What about your mother?

20 RP: Well, you know, my mother was just—mothers are people that worried about
21 their sons regardless of what they were doing. I supposed I gave her even more to worry
22 about.

23 RV: And what about your sister? Where is she in all of this?

24 RP: Well, she's going through high school; she's eventually going to college. We
25 correspond, but, you know, I don't see too much of her.

26 RV: Where did she go to college?

27 RP: She went to Brown for awhile and then after her second year she didn't stay
28 there, she went down and took a secretarial course in Manhattan and went to work in
29 Manhattan.

1 RV: Now, toward the end of your Benning training they're assigning you; you
2 know, you're going to be going places and what do they do with you? I mean, do they
3 have an assignment or?

4 RP: I get assigned back to the Defense Department. So basically, the agency picks
5 me up again.

6 RV: Right, but did the people at Benning kind of go, "Oh, okay."

7 RP: No, you just received your assignment, and nobody questioned it one way or
8 the other.

9 RV: Okay. Did you have any time off before you had to get back to Washington?

10 RP: Yeah, my parents came down for graduation and I had about a week or two. I
11 went up and saw a football game at Yale.

12 RV: Are you keeping in touch with your Yale buddies?

13 RP: Yeah sure, yeah.

14 RV: Okay, well I think his might be a good point for us to stop in the story for
15 today and we'll pick up with you getting back into the agency and going forward from
16 there.

17 RP: Okay.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [2] of [14]
April 25, 2006

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone continuing my oral history
2 interview with for the Vietnam Archive's Oral History Project with Rufus Phillips. Today
3 is April 25, 2006. It's 10:10 AM central standard time and 11:10 (AM) eastern time.
4 Rufus, you are in McLean, Virginia, again?

5 Rufus Phillips: That's right.

6 RV: And I'm in Lubbock, Texas. Let's pick up where we left off. You had been
7 detailed to Korea and your job was to disassemble an operation there. I wonder if you
8 could kind of talk about the environment, the atmosphere, and what you did.

9 RP: Okay, well, I was disassembling an operation which was involved in
10 producing leaflets in North Vietnam via balloon.

11 RV: Into North Korea you mean?

12 RP: Into North Korea, I'm sorry. And of course, there was no longer any need for
13 this because the war had ended in November. I mean, the truth had been declared the
14 November before. The problem was to, you know, a physical one of getting the
15 equipment, this printing press and shipping it back to the US. The other part was really,
16 trying to find something for the Korean employees to do which were pretty impossible.

17 RV: Why was that hard to do?

18 RP: Well, it was hard to do because there was simply no employment. Seoul had
19 truly been destroyed by the war. First of all, when the North Koreans invaded, they did a
20 lot of damage and then when the US came back up, you know, after the Incheon landing
21 and we pushed the Koreans north, there was a lot of hand to hand fighting in the city
22 itself. So practically everything, all the buildings, or almost all the buildings were
23 flattened. The Korean people were extremely poor; there was not a lot of employment.
24 There simply wasn't much of anything going on and people were desperate. People
25 would steal anything they could find to try to get money for food or if it were food, you
26 know, they would make off of it if they could. You know, the American opinion at the
27 time was that Korea was such a basket case it would never amount to anything. And so,
28 you know, that was the depressing aspect of the atmosphere. Then, I found out that I'd
29 gotten orders to be transferred down to Vietnam. Of course, I was delighted about that.

1 RV: Why?

2 RP: Well, I had been following—I had wanted to go to Vietnam to begin with
3 and there was nothing doing, you know, when I came out originally, there's just nothing.
4 No potential assignment. This opened—I thought, then the war was still going on and
5 then with Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Accords I figured that my chances of ever
6 getting what everybody called Indochina then were nil. And then all of a sudden, I get
7 this notice out of the blue that I'm being transferred down there and that's all I know. I
8 don't know anything about what I'm going to do or anything else. But I was delighted to
9 get out of Korea, and I was delighted—so I had orders to report to MAAG (Military
10 Advocate Advisory Group) Vietnam and a flight was arranged to take some of us, some
11 people, some officers, out of Japan. So, I flew to Japan, waited a couple of days and then
12 got a flight down to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines and from there transferred to
13 a—all this was by the Army, what was it called?

14 RV: The Army Air Corps?

15 RP: No, it was the Air Force then, but they had the transport command, whatever
16 that was called.

17 RV: Okay.

18 RP: So, I spent the night at Clark Field and the next morning, about six in the
19 morning, we were off for Saigon.

20 RV: Did you know exactly what your duties were going to be?

21 RP: No, I didn't know what I was going to be doing. I didn't even know who I
22 was—I was told to report into MAAG and then someone would inform me there by what
23 I was doing.

24 RV: How informed were you on the situation in Vietnam?

25 RP: Only indirectly from what I could read in *Stars and Stripes*. And I really
26 didn't know that much about the history and the culture of Vietnam. I had some French,
27 but when I got to Vietnam, I discovered my French was pretty primitive. So, I had to
28 really work at it to get it up to speed. At that time, very few Vietnamese spoke English.
29 And so, you just said—you needed a guy to speak French or Vietnamese to communicate
30 with most of the Vietnamese.

31 RV: How was your Vietnamese?

1 RP: Well, I never spoke Vietnamese. Back then, just about everybody in South
2 Vietnam all the way down into the provinces and even the district chief spoke French not
3 all that well. Of course, the officers in the Army were well educated and, you know, so
4 were what you'd call the fonctionnaire. A good part of this civil service and they all
5 spoke French. Even, you know, most of the troops in the Army spoke French or
6 understood French at a fairly direct and primitive level, so it was a pretty good lingua
7 franca. You couldn't talk to the villagers in French, but to most of the people that you had
8 to deal with first off, you could, so you weren't going, you know, you weren't trying to
9 go through several different people to find out what was going on. In other words, you
10 weren't going from English to French, to Vietnamese.

11 RV: Right. Yeah, I can imagine that would have been difficult.

12 RP: Yeah, it's possible and the guy I wound up working for made it work. I mean,
13 he had a very good interpreter in French, so it just took longer.

14 RV: Tell me your first impressions of Vietnam. I imagine you flew into Saigon.

15 RP: Yeah, I flew into Saigon, and we got there, and it took about maybe four or
16 five hours by piston driven aircraft to fly from the Philippines to Saigon back then. I
17 remember flying in over the coast and looking down and seeing that there were some
18 hills on the coast and all of a sudden, we were over this very green area that seemed to be
19 laced with rivers. And then I could see Saigon come into view as we sort of swung
20 around and approached the airport and it was covered with trees. You know, and you
21 could see how it was laid out along one side of the Saigon River with some long avenues.
22 Then we landed and I remember coming out into the boiling sun. Now, we were in the
23 rainy season, this was August the 8th. Of course, it didn't rain during the day, it rained in
24 the evenings, but it would get awful hot. We arrived right around siesta time, and I had
25 my orders and that's all I had. I didn't have a passport. We got to the immigration and
26 there was a French officer and what I presume was a Vietnamese standing there, the
27 Vietnamese that had a uniform on. They looked at my orders and just waved me through.
28 There was a fellow sent out by MAAG to pick us up in a jeep and so I got in back of the
29 jeep and we took off for Saigon. There was the most incredible mixture of vehicles of all
30 kinds on the streets. There were American jeeps and American personnel carriers
31 carrying around a variety of French troops. Some of them Senegalese with distinctive

1 uniform, some of them Foreign Legion with white kepis and then carrying Vietnamese
2 and I didn't know it at the time, there were the Binh Xuyen troops who had green berets
3 and in addition to that there were all kinds of small and larger French cars and there were
4 syclos which are the pedal pushed personnel, you know, they carry people. There were
5 motor syclos and there were bicycles and there were bicycles pulling carts and there were
6 motorcycles pulling carts and then there was this three-wheeler, little—they weren't
7 automobiles, they were like little pick-up trucks that were basically run with a
8 motorcycle, but with two wheels in the rear instead of one. They were made by the
9 Japanese. And then there were all the people. You had the Vietnamese and traditional ao
10 dai, the women and some of them in just a white top and black pants in conical hats and
11 then you had the Chinese with black pajamas, but not the white top. The Vietnamese
12 were—some of the more rural Vietnamese had, you know, the black pajamas, black top
13 and bottom. And then the Cambodian there, they had red checkered head cloths. And
14 then you were solid by all the smells of Saigon. Of nuoc nam which was this fish sauce.
15 The gas fumes from all the cars, and the owner of Coconut Oil which was used to make
16 things like potato chips, but they'd take shrimp and mash them up and make these shrimp
17 cakes. They weren't cakes; they were really like potato chips. You know, those were the
18 smells. And then as you were going in the city, there were—it looked sort of like I'd been
19 a young boy in Miami Beach during the war and I'd seen Spanish Colonial type
20 architecture in the tropics. Some of the architecture looked like that, you know, with kind
21 of yellowish stucco with walls around houses and bougainvillea over the walls. You
22 know, that's what it looked like, it was just a jumble of things that didn't look like
23 anything like Korea or Japan or anything like anything I'd ever seen before.

24 RV: What were you feeling, what do you remember thinking and feeling?

25 RP: I just thought I was very interested. I was excited to be there and very
26 interested to see what, you know, this was a strange land and obviously a very different
27 group of people. I felt like I'd been in Korea to get some feel for the Koreans, but this
28 seemed to be an entirely different kind of society and civilization. There was obviously a
29 lot of French influence because you could see it in the buildings; you could see it in the
30 way the streets were laid out and these boulevards, these wide boulevards. Saigon has
31 really been built up by the French. We were taken down to Hotel Majestic because there

1 were no billets available in May. But what had happened was that on, I think it was
2 August the 12th or the 13th was the final date according to the Geneva accords on which
3 you could bring any additional military personnel into Vietnam. So we had all gotten
4 into MAAG ahead of that deadline. That was the reason sort of for the rush to get people
5 in there. Because after that, we were trying to observe the rules of the Geneva accords so
6 if you added somebody after that, you'd have to take somebody out.

7 RV: Right.

8 RP: So anyway, MAAG had gotten additional people in and so there were just not
9 enough billets for people.

10 RV: Were you in uniform or were you in civilian clothes?

11 RP: Yes, I was in uniform.

12 RV: Okay, what was your rank at that point?

13 RP: Second lieutenant.

14 RV: Okay, did people know you were coming and expecting you?

15 RP: Well yeah, Lansdale was there, and he had gotten—the personnel officer at
16 MAAG knew that we were coming. The arrangements had been made to rent rooms in
17 the Majestic Hotel which was down on the waterfront and was one of, you know, was
18 really the hotel in Saigon at the time. So, yeah, but then, you know, after we got there, we
19 sort of hung around the Majestic for several days waiting for some word as to what we
20 were supposed to do.

21 RV: Who was with you?

22 RP: Nobody I knew. So, it became apparent according to the way we were
23 billeted there that the group that I had flown in with were all people destined to work for
24 Lansdale. Well, we didn't know each other, and they came from various locations. There
25 was a fellow who came from Korea, but he was with a different outfit in Korea, so I
26 didn't know him. Then there were people sent from the US from a variety of places.
27 There were only about—I guess at the beginning maybe twelve of us or something and
28 we were all put in rooms together and I roomed with a first lieutenant whose name was
29 Williams. So, we gradually got to know each other. Now, I would have been told in
30 Korea that I was to tell nobody about where I was going, that included my parents. And
31 so, they didn't know I had gone to Vietnam and then after about a week or so there we

1 were allowed to write letters saying that we were simply, we were now part of MAAG
2 Vietnam.

3 RV: What did you understand about what would happen in Vietnam? You
4 mentioned that Geneva accords. Had you read up on this?

5 RP: You know, I'd read basically, I think, what the agreement was or the outline
6 of the agreement in the *Stars and Stripes*, but that was as far as I got.

7 RV: So, your knowledge of really the historical context in what you might be
8 doing was limited. Was that fair?

9 RP: Limited, it was, yeah, somewhere close to zero. I had been trained, I had been
10 given paramilitary training so I thought, you know, I probably would have been picked
11 up because of that, because I had some French and maybe it would be some opportunity.
12 Nobody knew for sure whether the North Vietnamese were going to observe the accords,
13 so it was a very uncertain period.

14 RV: Tell me about at Lansdale and your first impressions of him.

15 RP: Well, he called a meeting of us, and he was staying in a very little, small
16 house with no room there, so we took one of the rooms where we were staying, and we
17 all crowded into it at the Majestic. And he came and I didn't know what to make of him
18 exactly. He was, you know, he was dressed in what was not a standard air force uniform.
19 We didn't have then, short sleeves and shorts which were what the French military wore
20 at all. So, he comes in and he's got, you know, a standard military khaki uniform except
21 he's got short sleeves, he's got shorts on, he's got knee socks, and he's got a standard air
22 force hat cocked on his head. He starts to talk about why we're there in general what
23 we're going to do. He explained that he had been sent there with pretty high authority to
24 try to help save South Vietnam. He hadn't quite figured out how to do that and he hadn't
25 quite figured out what assignments we were going to have, and he would let us know. As
26 I remember, that was most of what he said. He seemed to have a great deal of self
27 confidence and, you know, he felt obviously very comfortable in talking to us. He was
28 about 5'11" and handsome person with a mustache. I noticed a kind of large atoms apple
29 which looked a little bit like he had goiter, which he didn't. And he talked in a rather soft
30 spoken way. So, you know, I wouldn't say I was —I wasn't disappointed, but I was sort
31 of puzzled by the lack of direction in a clear mission for any of us.

1 RV: Right, you said he mentioned that he wasn't really sure how you all would go
2 about the task.

3 RP: Yeah, how and beyond that exactly what each of us might be doing, but he
4 would be making an assignment soon and then he left. He came in with a guy named Joe
5 Reddick who he was using as an interpreter and with a fellow named Lucien Conein who
6 was a major who had gotten there earlier and who was quite a character. I mean, I'm sure
7 you've heard about him.

8 RV: Yes.

9 RP: And then he left. And so, I suck up a friendship with a marine lieutenant
10 named or captain named Arthur Ando, he was about my own age, and we started
11 exploring Saigon. We got permission, we got identity cards from MAAG, and we got
12 permission to change our uniforms so we could get comfortable with knee socks, shorts,
13 and short sleeved shirts. Mainly by taking some khaki uniforms we had and just cutting
14 the pants and cutting the shirts, yeah.

15 RV: So, tell me about exploring Saigon and what that was like for the first time.

16 RP: What'd you say?

17 RV: What was Saigon like that first time?

18 RP: Well, Saigon was—some people that we got to know who'd been there longer
19 and who'd been in China before the communists took over in '48 said it was a little bit
20 like Shanghai. You had this atmosphere of enormous depression on the Vietnamese side
21 because the non-communist Vietnamese really had been bypassed totally by the French
22 and left out of any negotiations and had the division at the 17th Parallel imposed on them.
23 And so, they didn't know what to do, the government just been installed a police force
24 was in the hands of the Binh Xuyen having been sold to the Binh Xuyen by Bao Dai. The
25 Binh Xuyen were a gangster sect that had been started by a guy who had a fleet of taxis
26 in Saigon and then gradually built that up and built up his own kind of semi-criminal
27 organization. And then was hired or financed by the French and expanded his armed
28 forces to ensure security between Saigon and the coastal city of Cape St. Jaque which
29 was a French resort. And so, there were the Binh Xuyen still on French subsidy going
30 around the streets and the police were in the hands of the Binh Xuyen's so everything
31 was wide open. There was a huge gambling casino called the Grand Mont there were

1 night clubs that stayed open until four o'clock in the morning that were two huge whore
2 houses, each occupying about a block for French troops. There were numerous opium
3 dens. I mean, it was, you know, it was sort of like you got the feeling that this was the
4 Titanic. It was in the process of sinking. And everybody was trying to figure out how to
5 get out or how to have a good time.

6 RV: What did you all do to have a good time?

7 RP: Well, we went around town and explored the city. Part of the city was
8 Chinese so that was kind of interesting, that was the Cholon part. Went to night clubs,
9 drank with some of our friends. I remember going into some bars and striking up some
10 friendships with Frenchmen. One of them had been involved in the Dien Bien Phu and
11 had just been repatriated and he was absolutely furious at the—I'm trying to think of the
12 name of the guy who was a commander there. I can't think of his name right now, but he
13 claimed that the commander, among the air drops were champagne and strawberries for
14 this commander. We were standing at the bar one evening and one of the—I forgot which
15 particular restaurant or bar it was when the commander at Dien Bien Phu walked in, and
16 he had to be restrained by me and some others from physically attacking him. The other
17 thing was that the French would demoralize. There was one night club called the
18 Tudevoir which was up on the second floor it went up kind of a winding stairway. They
19 had taxi dancers that would dance for an hour or 100 piastres was about one dollar. And
20 they had a Filipino band and when the band didn't play, this was a favorite hangout for
21 the French paratroopers. When the bands took a break, they would sit on the floor, bang
22 their boots on the floor and sing French paratrooper songs. So anyway, at the same time
23 there were demonstrations going on in the streets about what, we didn't know because all
24 of the songs were in Vietnamese. And then we found out they were protesting the Geneva
25 Accords and we weren't sure whether they were non-communist protesting or
26 communists protesting the accords. And I realized I had to do something about my
27 French so Lansdale introduced me or I told him that pretty soon after, I did see him about
28 a week or two later. I saw him about a week later and I'll tell you about that, but anyway,
29 I went down to see a nice lady in the American embassy called Anita Love who was very
30 well plugged in. She found a French teacher for me who was the daughter of the French
31 Admiral in command of the French Navy. They had a house not too far from the hotel on

1 the waterfront and I used to go over there every afternoon and she was a very sweet
2 young gal about sixteen. I would take my French lessons under the stern eye of her
3 mother. And so that helped me pretty rapidly improve my French. I got moved out about,
4 I guess after a couple of weeks into an apartment building that was up on the second floor
5 where Lansdale and Joe Reddick moved temporarily. I stayed there with them, so I got a
6 chance to meet the translator, I met the Philippine military attaché, a guy named Joe
7 Banson that I got to know very well and did a lot of work with. That's when I asked
8 Lansdale about some help on the French, and he suggested I go see Anita Lowe.
9 Eventually Lansdale and Reddick already moved into another house, a bigger house, and
10 Ando and I moved into this apartment which was really nice. It had an open courtyard in
11 the center. The rooms arranged the courtyard. I was given an old jeep that a fellow named
12 Bohannon who had been a Lansdale deputy in the Philippines had gotten on the black
13 market over there and had to repaint it. It was painted blue which made it sort of stand
14 out. It didn't have—it was entirely open on the sides, so I had to keep a towel in it when
15 it rained to dry it off, but that became my principle means of getting around. And then
16 eventually I guess it was maybe two weeks or three weeks I got called in by Lansdale,
17 you know, for an interview and presumably tell me what I was going to do. And so, I
18 reported in and saluted and that was the last time I ever saluted him. You know, the
19 whole command was very informal. So, I sat down, and he asked me about my
20 background, what I studied in college. I told him that I was a history major, but that I
21 thought about being a psychology major and I did take some psychology courses. He
22 said—and I knew that Ando had seen him before, and Nick was going to be sent up to go
23 to North Vietnam for some kind of mysterious mission because Hanoi was still in French
24 hands and wouldn't be evacuated until late October. I didn't know what he was doing,
25 but it sure as hell sounded exciting. He was going to go up there with Conein. So, when I
26 came in, I was hoping that maybe I'd be doing something like that instead, Lansdale said,
27 "Well, what I want you to do is go out and get a note of the psychological warfare people
28 at the army general staff and the Vietnamese Army, the general staff and find out what
29 they're doing and see if he could help them." He said they got a psywar company that
30 goes out and gives shows for villagers and they accompany the troops and he said, "I
31 think we're going to need their help. In the meantime, maybe they can carry out some

1 psychological operations. So go out there and get to know them." I said, "Well, I know
2 something about psychology, I guess, but I don't even know anything about
3 psychological warfare. So, he reaches up on—he's got some books with him, and he
4 reaches up on the shelf and he pulls out a book called *Psychological Warfare* by Paul
5 Lineburger which is the first book that had ever been written on the subject. It mainly
6 concerned what would have been done during World War II and he said, "Here, read
7 this." So, that was my assignment, that's how I got told what I was supposedly doing.

8 RV: What'd you think about it?

9 RP: Well, I was sort of disappointed. You know, I had gung ho feelings about
10 something more exciting to this and this doesn't sound particularly exciting. But, you
11 know, it sounded interesting. At least I would get to know some Vietnamese and began to
12 understand something about Vietnam and maybe I could be helpful some way. I still
13 didn't have an idea what sort of plan he had, that Lansdale had. So, you know, so I went
14 back I'd say somewhat disappointed, but still happy at the prospect of being able to do
15 something. Do you have any particular questions about where we are now because I'll go
16 on and to talk about my first visit out there?

17 RV: I want to ask you a bit more about Lansdale and his attitude toward I guess
18 the pre-war time, the pre- '65, I guess, the date that a lot of people assign.

19 RP: Yes, this is 1954; this is August, September '54, yeah.

20 RV: How would you gauge his attitude toward helping the South Vietnamese?
21 We're going to help establish this country and this is the way that the US Government
22 wants us to go or did he see it as more of a South Vietnamese support operation. Do you
23 see what I'm asking?

24 RP: Yeah, you understand that at that time the US Government was absolutely
25 frantic. If you look at the record, you will see that we didn't have any idea of how or if
26 South Vietnam could be saved at all. The feeling was that well, if Vietnam goes, there
27 goes Cambodia and Laos and there probably goes Thailand, Malaysia, et cetera.

28 RV: Exactly, what did you think of that domino theory at that point?

29 RP: Well, it seemed to make sense. Of course, later on I would get to know the
30 situation in the rest of Indochina a little better because I went up to Laos in '57. Yeah, it
31 makes a lot of sense because there was simply a political vacuum in the rest of Southeast

1 Asia. I mean, the Lao was not organized, the Cambodians, God knows, were not
2 organized. The Thai, you know, were being run by a triumvirate with no popular support
3 at all in the population. It was a king that presumably held the country together, but in
4 terms of any kind of affective government, there wasn't any. And then, of course, in
5 Malaysia, the communist insurgency there was just beginning to get cranked up. So,
6 yeah, it wasn't—later on it got viewed as some kind of cockeyed theory that would never
7 had happened and so forth us on, but given the fact that the communist Chinese had taken
8 over in China in '48 and now the North Vietnamese, I mean the Communists were taking
9 over North Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh had been ahead of the Indochina Communist
10 Party. They had roots going into Thailand, I mean, you know, there was a great fear, but
11 nobody knew what to do. So, Lansdale was sent out to really some kind of last resort, you
12 know, work a miracle, save South Vietnam somehow.

13 RV: It really wasn't communicated at all to the public, would you agree?

14 RP: Oh no, no. Well, to begin with, his basic mission was covert even though we
15 operated pretty overtly out there, we didn't advertise the fact that we were being
16 supported by the CIA. A lot of the things that we did were completely overt, but the
17 reason, the rational behind sending him was because he'd been so successful in helping
18 Magsaysay defeat the Huks in the Philippines.

19 RV: Right.

20 RP: Was maybe he could pull another rabbit out the hat somehow. I know you
21 could answer this now. I didn't know much about him, you know, when I got there, I
22 remember I asked Williams about it, "What do you know about it?" and he said, "Well,
23 not very much. He's got a mysterious character that seemed to have done great things in
24 the Philippines, but I don't know."

25 RV: How much did you know about what had happened in the Philippines?

26 RP: No much, you know, I didn't know the history of his mission there and what
27 he'd done at all. I just remembered reading, of course, that the Huks Rebellion had been
28 defeated mainly by the then Secretary of Defense, Magsaysay and then Magsaysay had
29 gone on to win an election against the pretty corrupt president named Quirino and that he
30 had great popular support, but that's all I knew about him. I didn't really know anything
31 in detail about the history of the Philippines which I would learn about.

1 RV: Right, right. There was criticism I guess later on and especially I've heard
2 this recently and heard about Lansdale and his critics. Of course, there's a lot of positive
3 things said about him, but one of the things said that he kind of tried to apply what he had
4 done in the Philippines and kind of rubberstamped it onto what was going on in South
5 Vietnam.

6 RP: That was not true, no. He very quickly acquired a feel for the Vietnamese and
7 an understanding of their mentality and their culture and how they did things, and it
8 wasn't the same as the Filipinos at all. I mean, here you had a Confucian culture, you
9 know, influenced by the Chinese versus a Malaysian culture in the Philippines with
10 influences by the Spanish and by the Americans. You know, you also had French
11 influence in Indochina, so it was a very different ball of wax. What he sensed were the
12 kinds of actions that were needed to pull the country together, to give it some coherent
13 reason for there being a government and he understood those kinds of basics. So, he just
14 applied them to Vietnam, but, you know, the notion that he had some kind of cookie
15 cutter concept that he applied to Vietnam wasn't true. One of the things that he did
16 shortly after he got there was that practically the first time, he went to see Diem, he asks
17 him if he could give him some ideas for a political plan or a plan, you know, to make
18 South Vietnam into a nation. So, he wrote out a whole thing for Diem and it covered
19 everything. It covered how Diem himself needed to establish some kind of
20 communication with his own people and how he had to take care of the refugees coming
21 down from the north, how he needed some way to establish government in several large
22 areas of South Vietnam where the Viet Minh as they were called, they were evacuating
23 and going north. He had to take care of the Vietnamese Army veterans, a number of
24 which were being demobilized and so on. So, Lansdale just sketched out a program for it
25 which suggested some things that he thought that Diem ought to work on. Diem was very
26 grateful for that.

27 RV: When was this first meeting?

28 RP: Oh, I think actually that probably occurred in July before we got there, late
29 July.

30 RV: Do you remember Lansdale's impression with Diem?

1 RP: Well, yeah, I had to characterize that. Well, he thought he liked Diem. He
2 established rapport with Diem which was not easy to do. But then he had this gift for
3 establishing rapport with almost an Asian. He did this basically by being a very good
4 listener by remembering what he was told and by offering ideas or suggestions about how
5 somebody might do something that were practical and could be applied in a Vietnamese
6 context. It was on that basis that he establishes this pretty close personal relationship with
7 Diem. He thought that Diem had some limitations that were his, I don't know if you
8 would call it—well, how to characterize it without making it sound trite. I mean, Diem
9 was a very traditional Vietnamese. He'd come from a very influential family in the
10 center. He had notions about democracy, but they were pretty theoretical. He was a great
11 patriate, and he was very brave. He was the only guy there who could pull the country
12 together. I mean, he was the prime minister who had been pointed by Bao Dai and
13 immediately various forces started trying to overthrow him. The first was General Hinh
14 who was the Army Chief of Staff. The French absolutely detested him because he had
15 never knuckled under to them. In fact, he refused to take the prime ministership on
16 several occasions before because they would never give Vietnam enough independence
17 and so he was known, you know, they thought he was anti-French. Well, in that sense he
18 was, he's just anti-colonialist French or [anti-]French Colonial and a very proud
19 nationalist and respected if not liked even by you know his political opponent. So,
20 Lansdale could see that he was not certainly dealing with him like Magsaysay. It's an
21 entirely different personality in a different culture. Very outgoing, very action oriented
22 who had a gift for, you know, for kind of an open leadership which did not come
23 naturally to Diem. I mean, mixing with people did not come naturally to him nor did, you
24 know, trying to establish some contact with the people out in the countryside other than
25 the very formal kind of relationship. So, Diem only had limited what we would call
26 political skills, but he had some other qualities that Lansdale really admired which had to
27 do with his honesty and integrity and sense of personal honor. So, you know, I guess I'm
28 giving you a picture of how Lansdale saw him, but Lansdale got to like him and saw him
29 as a human being. Afterwards many years later trying to convey this to people who sort
30 of saw Diem as some kind of a wooden chief of state. You know, he would keep tell him,

1 “Well, he’s a human being, he has human reactions.” And so, Lansdale I think
2 understood the human side of Diem. I don’t know if that gives you a sketch or not.

3 RV: Oh, absolutely does. You know, Diem, he underwent this severe criticism
4 and then he’s—

5 RP: You know, later on he became more removed, more rigid, but the extent of
6 his influence was rather new and so forth. But anyway, that’s I think—you know,
7 sometimes he would be so—I mean, he just wouldn’t talk to or deal with people like the
8 head of the Binh Xuyen. He’d just didn’t want to make a deal with gangsters; it was a
9 moral issue to him. And so, Lansdale would get frustrated because he thought maybe
10 there were ways of coming up with something constructive at the Binh Xuyen might do
11 and Diem wasn’t prepared to go down that road. Diem did have a feel for how his people
12 thought about things and particularly how they thought about the kind of corruption in
13 government that was represented by groups like the Binh Xuyen.

14 RV: Right and Diem saw this for what it was.

15 RP: Yeah, he saw it for what it was, and it was a moral issue.

16 RV: How did Lansdale advise him to approach the Binh Xuyen because he had to
17 feel with them?

18 RP: Well, you know, you’re now getting me into Lansdale’s biography.

19 RV: I know, I know. We could refer listeners to that.

20 RP: Yeah, because you could refer them to in the midst of wars, you can refer
21 them to Cecil Currie’s biography on Lansdale. I think that lays it out pretty well.

22 RV: Absolutely. Did you have access, or how far off the chain did you have
23 access into the South Vietnamese Government?

24 RP: How far up the chain?

25 RV: Yeah, and this isn’t the initial—

26 RP: On the Vietnamese side?

27 RV: Yes, sir.

28 RP: Well, initially I started out working with the G5 which was a guy named
29 Captain Jai and with some of his staff and with the fellow who worked at the presidency
30 who was helping out with a young guy named Nguyen Tai, who had been educated at
31 Michigan State who was helping out with the press office. Those were my initial contacts

1 and, in the end, I was helped by Joe Branson who was a Colonel in the Philippine Army
2 that was actually a brother-in-law of Magsaysay. Who had gone through the Huk
3 Campaign and gotten to know Nguyen in Vietnam for a couple of years. He had gotten
4 on the Vietnamese and the French pretty well. It was very adroit at just kind moving
5 around and understanding what was going on. So, I leaned on him for advice and then
6 sort of opportunities began to present themselves for doing something positive. One of
7 these was that Lansdale felt very strongly that the Vietnamese need is a psychological
8 shot in the arm. They had very little self confidence in themselves. They don't run
9 anything or do anything. See, the French dominated things. I mean, they never operated
10 the Vietnamese Army above battalion level with just Vietnamese officers. So, they didn't
11 really have much self confidence. So, one of the first things we did was he got a group
12 together of Vietnamese from the Army, from the army staff. Out of the presence, there
13 was this guy I knew In Tai. A fellow named, I think it was Xuan who had been involved
14 in social action organization in Saigon and organized groups by block to clean up
15 neighborhoods and that sort of stuff. This is sort of an eclectic group that he got together
16 and persuaded Gen. Hinh and Diem that they ought to go over to the Philippines and take
17 a look at the Huk Campaign, anti-Huk Campaign and how the full thing must have done
18 this and that might give them some ideas about how the government in the army might be
19 effective in, you know, extending government out into the countryside in South Vietnam.
20 In taking over these areas that had been ruined by the Viet Minh for many of them up to
21 nine years, so I became a liaison officer with that group and went over to the Philippines
22 which was my first real exposure to what had happened there and to Filipinos in general
23 other than (inaudible). I found the Filipinos very easy to get along with and to work with.

24 RV: When was this approximately?

25 RP: That was in September.

26 RV: When you went out, when you got that first assignment to read the book and
27 then to proceed out, I guess, out touch the countryside, is that correct?

28 RP: No, I just drove out to the general staff and introduced myself to Capt. Jai and
29 said Lansdale sent me, and I was there to find out what they were doing and see if we
30 could help somebody. So, he sent me off with—Capt. Duc was there with one of the two
31 psywar companies they had. One of them was in Saigon and one of them was still up in

1 North Vietnam. So, I started to get to know these, you know—Capt. Duc had a second
2 lieutenant who became a very close friend of mine and that's when I met the Pham Xuan
3 Am who turns out to be the top North Vietnamese spy. Anyway, I went out and I saw the
4 psywar company, I saw that they were very poorly equipped. The French had just given
5 them a lot of hand-me-down stuff and so we were able to order some loud hailers for
6 them, you know, and some improved loudspeaker systems and so that sort of started my
7 relationship with these guys.

8 RV: Okay, and then you head over to the Philippines.

9 RP: And then I went over the Philippines and that was really an eye opener for me
10 as well as for the Vietnamese. What was an eye opener for the Vietnamese were two
11 things. One was that the Filipinos were running everything, and the Americans were
12 running nothing. That was the first thing that struck them in contrast to the situations in
13 Vietnam.

14 RV: Right.

15 RP: You know, they just derived on a lot of—I think it came back with the feeling
16 of, "We can do that, too." The other thing was the whole business of how the army, you
17 know, if they were going to occupy these areas of South Vietnam and set up government
18 how they should deal with the people. And Magsaysay had such a people-oriented
19 approach to what was not called counterinsurgency then, but that's what it was. You
20 know, that rubbed off on them and the other thing I remember particularly was we had
21 gone down in the provinces to see something, and we came back, and it was late in the
22 evening, about ten o'clock at night. We had a Filipino with us and this Capt. Mont who
23 was on Gen. Hinh's staff and I were in the car, and we drove by this building and the
24 lights were on and it looked like a typical, you know, like a government building. And I
25 said to the Filipino, I said, "What's that?" and he said, "That's the Department of
26 Agriculture." And I said, "Are people working there?" "Yeah." He said, "They are." It
27 was ten o'clock at night. And I said, "My god." And I turned to them, and I said—I
28 remember saying to Capt. Mont, I said, "Look, if you guys can develop this kind of spirit
29 you can do anything." And that was sort of the impression I got from the trip to the
30 Philippines. We actually had a session with Magsaysay himself. You see, Lansdale was
31 so close to Magsaysay that he was like a brother. So, this was really a VIP tour and

1 Magsaysay was very interested in helping the Vietnamese. And so, you know, we got the
2 top-level treatment in terms of seeing everything that had to do with the Huk Campaign
3 and how the Philippine Army operated and what they did and how they did it. So, when
4 we came back, the Vietnamese run up a report, a joint report, and it was given to Gen.
5 Hinh and to Diem. It formed a basis later on for what was called National Security Action
6 which was the whole scheme of how the Vietnamese Army was going to go in and
7 reoccupy or occupy a lot of these huge areas that the Viet Minh were evacuating and then
8 set up government there. So then when we got back that was also followed by a trip to a
9 place called Long My down in the Delta. It had been an area that had been—this was in
10 October. This was one of the Viet Minh areas north of Ca Mau that had been under their
11 control and was evacuated at the same time that Hanoi was evacuated by the French. And
12 so, at that point there were no particular plans, so we went down to look at what had
13 happened there. We found that the Vietnamese major had commanded I think it was just
14 the battalion of troops that had gone into this area, and they really didn't have anything to
15 help the population. The attitude was good, the major was a guy of Cambodian origin and
16 there were a fair number of ethnic Cambodians in the area, and he seemed to be liked by
17 the people and the situation of the people themselves was pretty desperate. They had no
18 medical attention, no medicines, no mosquito nets, in the evening out in the Delta
19 towards October, November, December the evening got pretty cool and they had no
20 blankets. They did have rice so they could feed themselves. But we found this army unit
21 was doing a pretty credible job of repairing bridges over canals and that kind of stuff, but
22 without any substantial help. So, we went back to Saigon, and we drew up a list of things
23 that we thought could be dropped in by air. Then we got into a big wrangle about trying
24 to find planes to do this because most of the C-47s were still controlled by the French.
25 We managed to get an air drop in there and then based on that situation and what had
26 been learned from the trip to the Philippines, I drew up an idea for the Long My area as
27 kind of a pilot project and how the Vietnamese Army should go in and occupy a place.
28 Then from there we started to get into, "Well, how do you do this on a national scale?" I
29 worked with Lansdale on developing a document which was called a national security
30 action plan. We were going to call in passive pacification, but the Vietnamese preferred
31 the work as National Security Action. What that did was divide Vietnam into about three

1 different zone. One zone was where there was already civil government place, another
2 zone was where the Viet Minh had substantial control of where there was really very
3 little government before and therefore you had to set up government and the third areas
4 were areas that was still controlled by the Viet Minh and wouldn't be evacuated until
5 April of 1955. Lansdale sort of sold his plan to Diem and then he sold it to Gen. Daniel
6 who was the commander of the MAAG and to Gen. Lawton Collins who had come in as
7 an ambassador. It was formally declared in late December and became some of the policy
8 document or how the Vietnamese were going to deal with this. This became part of their
9 national problem and so I became very involved in that. That became the main thing that
10 I was doing. That carries you up to, well let's see, when Christmas rolled around
11 Lansdale was still very busy, but he said, "Why don't you take a break in the
12 Philippines." And so, I said, "Well, that's fine." He said, "I'll make some arrangements
13 for you." So, I go, and I fly over to Clark Field, and I got picked up at Clark Field by
14 some Filipinos that I had met. We'd been over there before, and I was driven down to
15 Malacañang Palace, and I found that I'm a personal guest of Magsaysay and I'm staying
16 in the tea house on the grounds of Malacañang.

17 RV: Wow.

18 RP: And I had breakfast with Magsaysay and his family Christmas morning.

19 RV: Well, tell me about that.

20 RP: Well, that was really very heartwarming. You know, in my family we had a
21 very strong tradition of Christmas and I think Lansdale got a feeling for that somehow, so
22 he thought that, you know, that I had been doing some pretty good work and I deserved a
23 break. So, he had just called up, apparently called up Magsaysay on the telephone and
24 asked him if he would mind and he said no. He met me and delighted to have him, and he
25 wanted me to come for Christmas breakfast, so I did. There was Magsaysay and his wife
26 and his children and me. It was just a wonderful affair.

27 RV: What kind of food was it, what was the environment like?

28 RP: Well, it seems to me that—well, I wasn't there Christmas dinner.

29 RV: Sure.

30 RP: I think it was typical Filipino food, probably rice and eggs and some sweet
31 bread, some coffee. What I remember most was Magsaysay talking about things that had

1 happened to him during the Huk Campaign and his whole relationship with Lansdale and
2 that he said, "he's my brother". I remember one of the stories was I think Lansdale tells,
3 but he would regale his family with tales from when he was either Secretary of Defense
4 or things that he continued to do when he was president. He had something called
5 complain and action commission which he started when you were Secretary of Defense,
6 and the idea was that you could—back then you could send a telegram to the secretary of
7 defense free of charge if you were having problems with the government. In other words,
8 if you were being oppressed or abused or had a complaint you could send a complaint in
9 and then Magsaysay would send out people to investigate the complaints and sometimes,
10 he'd just go out himself. He never publicized it, but, you know, it would get around by
11 word of mouth of what he was doing. He would carry out when he was Secretary of
12 Defense a lot of surprise inspections. So, the armed forces, the units, and the unit
13 commanders never knew if he was going to descend on them. It changed the alertness and
14 the posture of a lot of the Army. There was one story he told which I had told before
15 which I think Lansdale tells it. The story was that Magsaysay had gone up to inspect this
16 one unit in this one province and he arrives around noon, and he finds nobody in the
17 orderly room except from one non-com who's sort of dosing and the commander's
18 nowhere to be found. There's the gun rack, you know, with rifles in it and the Huks could
19 have come in and taken the place with no problem. And so, he sends the orderly out to
20 wake the commander and he gets behind the door with one of these rifles and the guy
21 comes running in sort of zipping up his pants. You know, Magsaysay stepped from
22 behind the door, sticks a rifle in his back and said, "You'd be dead you son of a bitch if I
23 was a Huk." Well, with stuff like that the word kind of went around. I mean, he was that
24 kind of person. So, he told that story and that's the one I remember.

25 RV: What was his family like? Were they welcoming to you?

26 RP: Oh yeah, and Mrs. Magsaysay was so nice. I mean, she could tell I was
27 homesick, and she was so solicitous. If you know Filipinos, in a family sense they're just
28 the kindest people in the world. Anyway, I'd been working with operation brotherhood in
29 Vietnam which was a JC (Joint-Commissioned) sponsored a group of medical teams that
30 came over and started working with the refugees who were coming down from North
31 Vietnam and I got to know Filipinos. So, it didn't seem strange to me at all by this time.

1 RV: How long did you stay there in the Philippines?

2 RP: Oh, just a couple of days. I stayed about three days and then I went up to
3 Clark Field because I was still getting jump pay and I had done one jump in Korea, and
4 you had to four jumps a year to maintain your jump pay which was about one hundred
5 and ten dollars a month so back then that was substantial. So, through Lansdale and his
6 associate's guy, Col. Hanen, I made arrangements to jump with the air/sea rescue unit
7 that was quartered up at Clark to make three jumps in one day on the golf course. Well,
8 what I didn't know was that in the dry season up there the golf course becomes about as
9 hard as concrete. So, I made the first two okay and then the third jump the wind got gusty
10 and swung me up in the air just as I was about to hit the ground so when I hit the ground
11 it was heals and tail so I just kind of laid there in shock. After awhile I was able to get up
12 and walk over. The only constellation I had was that there was a master jumper who had
13 over three hundred jumps who'd also jump with us and he was out cold. So, I was really
14 hurting pretty bad, and I then caught a flight back to Saigon and I had to lay on the floor
15 of the C-47. Then when I got back, I managed to get a small innertube from the medical
16 folks. I rode around on it for the next month. But anyway, that's just a side.

17 RV: So, you were able to get the three jumps in and then you came on back to
18 South Vietnam?

19 RP: Right.

20 RV: So, Lansdale just kind of knew that you needed this, to get away and
21 experience Christmas.

22 RP: Yeah that, and he thought this would be something that, you know, would be
23 really nice for me. He's a very kind person that way and he took care of his people.

24 RV: I've heard that, and I've read that in his biographies. How did it come that
25 you were working so closely with him? Was he doing this with others as well?

26 RP: Yeah, we weren't very big so almost everybody had some personal contact
27 with him. Then at this time as we got towards the end of 1954, there was a movement on
28 to set up a joint American/French training mission. See, the MAAG before that had no
29 function except to supply the French with equipment and then to inspect the equipment to
30 see how it was being used. It had no advisory function directly with the Vietnamese. So,
31 the French agreed that it should be a joint training mission, it was called TRIM (Training

1 Relations and Instruction Mission). This was set up and within TRIM, there was a
2 National Security Division created and Lansdale was the sign as head of it and then I was
3 detailed to work under him, and we had a couple officers. We got one officer we got from
4 the regular MAAG staff and then there were several other folks who were working on
5 other aspects in support of different things. You were assigned to this division. Well, the
6 big activity of that division was all of these Vietnamese army occupations of vast
7 amounts of territory that had been evacuated and were going to be evacuated by the Viet
8 Minh. Beginning in February there was Ca Mau, Ca Mau Peninsula which had almost a
9 million people in it. And then in April there was what was called Interzone Five up in
10 Central Vietnam which was most of Quang Nai Province and all of Binh Dinh Province
11 which had maybe a million and a half people in it. These had been areas that the Viet
12 Minh had controlled practically, entirely for nine years. So, I became very involved in
13 that. That became my main job.

14 RV: This was in early '55?

15 RP: Well yeah, this was end of '54 early '55. I was working with the Vietnamese
16 army general staff planning and an operation was set up in Ca Mau and I went down to
17 help the commander of that operation and then actually was the only American that went
18 in with the troops in that operation.

19 RV: How did the troops treat you? I mean, did they understand you're working
20 with the CIA or civilian conversion?

21 RP: No, no.

22 RV: You're in uniform.

23 RP: Yeah, I was in uniform except when I went into the areas with them when I
24 went in as an advisor and observer. I wore civilian clothes because we did not want it to
25 appear as if it were in any way an American kind of operation. We were very sensitive to
26 that and so were the Vietnamese. When we're out dealing with the villagers and that sort
27 of thing, I never wore a uniform because I didn't want to make it look like I was there as
28 some kind of an American replacement of the French.

29 RV: Right. Before we stop for today, what was your impression of the French
30 there? And I guess civilian and military?

1 RP: Well, I had probably more contact with the military than I did with the
2 civilians. There were a lot of sour grapes and there were some people that still had a very
3 colonial attitude towards the Vietnamese. And there were others that had a more
4 enlightened view, but I would say that the ones with the colonial attitude tended to
5 predominate. And then they were very jealous of the Americans coming in and sort of
6 replacing them as one Frenchman explained it. He said, "Suppose you had this mistress
7 and somehow you couldn't continue to take care of her. So, the next thing you know you
8 see her riding down the street in this big Cadillac with this wealthy American." He said,
9 "Now you know how we feel." So, there was that kind of a feeling. And then in the
10 National Security Division, the French seemed to be more interested in trying to find out
11 what we were doing and we found out later that most of them were assigned from the
12 French National Intelligence Organization, SDECE (Service de Documentation
13 Exterieure et de Contre-Espionnage), to sort of track what we were doing rather than
14 trying to be helpful which was kind of funny because there wasn't anything that we were
15 really doing, at least I was doing, that wasn't completely over. The French raised some
16 objections to my being the only person going out with the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese
17 said to them at one point, they said, "Well, we don't want any foreigners." And they
18 pointed to me they said, "What do you mean? He's a foreigner." And they said, "No, he's
19 our friend."

20 RV: And I'm sure that frustrated them.

21 RP: Oh yeah. And the Vietnamese would do things to sort of stick needles in
22 them. They had a big formal parade after TRIM had been formed, some of the
23 Vietnamese Army units had this formal parade and they had asked a couple of MAAG
24 guys to show them the American Manual of Arms. And so, they got this little special
25 unit. They trained them up in secret on how to do the American Manual of Arms. And so,
26 they're marching in front of the stand, and you hear all these French officers and some
27 American officers and Gen. Daniel and this unit, you know, with the Vietnamese flag.
28 I've forgotten how many guys. I wasn't there, I was told about it. They march up, they
29 stop, they turn right face, and they execute the American Manual of Arms just to dig the
30 French. That kind of stuff just made them bananas.

31 RV: Yeah, I can imagine. Why don't we go ahead and stop for today, sir?

Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [3] of [14]
November 5, 2020

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today is 5 November 2020 and I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 joining me from his home in Virginia. Rufus, several years ago when you left off this
4 interview with my predecessor, Richard Verrone, you were looking at the end of 1954,
5 you had spent the Christmas time in the Philippines and had come back to South
6 Vietnam. If you would for me and for the users of this interview, listeners of this
7 interview; describe the scene taking place there in early 1955. What's going on, the
8 political landscape; I know obviously we have like I mentioned a little bit ago, like a
9 vacuum of power with the Viet Minh leaving as a result of the agreements and the French
10 leaving. There's an awful lot of political, social, cultural, financial, military issues going
11 on. So, with that said, can you set the landscape for me here?

12 Rufus Philips: Well, I'll try to. Yeah, I'd say that '54 leading to '55 was a period
13 in which the Americans were confused in terms of what to do, if anything, to help South
14 Vietnam. And the direction was really subtlety set by Lansdale himself who had an
15 inquisitive mind and a feel for what was important in terms of trying to get the
16 government to operate, to address two tremendous problems. One was all the refugees
17 coming out of the North which eventually numbered almost one million and what to do
18 about the large swathes of territory that the Viet Minh had largely controlled for nine
19 years that were being evacuated north. And these were substantial parts of what was
20 South Vietnam, both down in the Delta and up in the central part of Vietnam. So, what he
21 tried to do and what he succeeded in doing was helping Diem who had come into office
22 appointed by Bao Dai with a great deal of knowledge about his own country and some
23 administrative experience as a province chief, but no experience at all in trying to be the
24 Prime Minister, running a government with a country pretty much in chaos.

25 KC: Sure.

26 RP: And so, what Lansdale tried to do was help him focus on some of the
27 important problems and to try to get the government to address those. So, one of the
28 things that he was able to do—and I will comment that Lansdale, there's some critique I
29 would say of recent nature of how could somebody who's had no experience in Vietnam,

1 no experience with Vietnamese culture come in and start telling the president what to do?
2 Well, first of all it wasn't true that he didn't have any experience, he had been over on a
3 visit before that, but secondly there's some things that any government under certain
4 circumstances would have to do. And he had already been advising President Magsaysay
5 in the Philippines, both as Secretary of Defense and then as President, so he had a pretty
6 good idea of what governments need to do in order to win the support of their own people
7 and to function. So, he focused on the two big problems, and he got Diem to set up a
8 commission to handle the refugees, he got a very active guy appointed head of the
9 commission, he wasn't very effective from a bureaucratic point of view, but from an
10 enthusiasm point of view he helped a lot. And then, he focused on the Armed Services,
11 the Vietnamese Army because they were the only possible instrument that could help in
12 reoccupying the territory that was being evacuated. The problem there was that he didn't
13 have much cooperation out of the Chief of Staff, Gen. Hinh, who was also a French
14 citizen, who was trying to overthrow him. Lansdale had to try and deal with that plot, and
15 he successfully stalled it, I won't go into the details. So, leading up to '55 we had gotten
16 to the point at which the Vietnamese Army and their Department of Defense was actively
17 planning what to do and how to do it in terms of using the army to occupy these two vast
18 territories and that is what I got very deeply involved in and a lot of that began with a trip
19 to the Philippines which I have recounted before, which people studied what—the
20 Vietnamese party that I helped and accompanied over there studied what the Philippine
21 Army had done in terms of dealing with the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines in terms of
22 Civic Action and to imbed the idea of Civic Action into the Vietnamese army. And we
23 were successful in doing that, so as we kicked off 1955, several good things were
24 happening. One was that the military plot against Diem had failed, the Army started
25 preparing itself for the occupation of these zones and our aid program and Aid Mission
26 had become very involved working directly with the Vietnamese to resettle the refugees
27 coming down from the north. And that was working. So, they would of course develop
28 subsequent political problems because there were the religious sects and there were
29 powerful remnants of the French colonial administration promoting them as an
30 alternative to Diem and he was beginning to face real, severe pressure from those. That
31 was something that I didn't work on with Lansdale and the subsequent so-called war in

1 Saigon was actually won by the Vietnamese army who supported Diem and that was a lot
2 of very effective political action that I was not directly involved in. my role became one
3 of accompanying the Vietnamese army into, first of all, the Ca Mau which was at the
4 southern tip of the Delta of South Vietnam and preliminary training. I turned out to be the
5 only American who was allowed to accompany the Vietnamese army into South Vietnam
6 as kind of an advisor. I was more, when I say I was an advisor, I was learning and trying
7 to figure out how to assist these people in doing the operation the right way. There was
8 something else that Lansdale had encouraged and started which was Operation
9 Brotherhood, which was spearheaded by the Vietnamese, I mean by the Filipinos, which
10 provided medical teams of doctors and nurses to go into areas which the Viet Minh had
11 held where there had been no medical doctors or health services for almost nine years.
12 So, the first big operation other than helping the refugees, the initial effort of these
13 medical teams was helping the refugees, but then some teams were provided to go into
14 Ca Mau and so part of my responsibility was kind of looking out for them and running
15 interference for them in terms of dealing with the Vietnamese, which was not all that
16 difficult. There was some misunderstanding. I spoke French by this time fairly fluently
17 and none of the Filipinos did. The intermediary kind of communicator was a Vietnamese
18 to make sure everything ran smoothly. Anyhow, I went into Ca Mau actually with the
19 medical teams and stayed there working with the Vietnamese we had trained some
20 psychological warfare units when we, meaning the Vietnamese had, to work with the
21 population. The Army itself, we started some Civic Action training and when I say we I
22 am kind of identifying the Vietnamese.

23 KC: Sure.

24 RP: The Vietnamese started, we were just supporting and that was fairly
25 successful, but not to the degree that we wanted because the amount of time we had, the
26 operation to occupy Ca Mau began in February, so we didn't have a lot of time to prepare
27 the troops. We had examples of which you would indoctrinate the troops and I remember
28 one particular one that was a bunch of Vietnamese truck drivers, that roads were not all
29 that great, but they did carry troops as far as they could on trucks. So, the lectures being
30 given by the Vietnamese to these troops, including the drivers, would be considered of
31 the population, et cetera, et cetera. I never forget, the drivers come out and take off in

1 their trucks and they go roaring down this street, scattering people and chickens and you
2 realize it's going to take more indoctrination here. And we were talking about an army
3 that had been used, French-led to a considerable extent and uses combat soldiers and had
4 a reputation for stealing chickens and not treating the population well at all. So, just the
5 whole idea was to change the psychology.

6 KC: Yeah, and I think that's one of the important things to understand is that you
7 are taking a combat force such as it was and trying to turn them towards Civic Action
8 because I know for you and Lansdale this is going to be the number one priority in terms
9 of getting these things settled. You go down to the Ca Mau Peninsula, what other sort of
10 issues in addition to Operation Brotherhood with the medical effort there, what other sort
11 of day-to-day, on the ground issues were the people in the Peninsula needing from Civic
12 Action? What did you hope to provide for them?

13 RP: Well, they were really impoverished, and I remember going down to the tip
14 of South Vietnam which was a village called Nom Can and it was an all-day trip down
15 the rivers on sort of river boats with outboard motors. We got to Nom Can as dusk was
16 beginning to fall and I noticed that this was all a mangrove swamp area with very wide-
17 open waterways, and I noticed that as it was getting dark there was this cloud coming out
18 of the mangrove swamp and I wondered what the hell is that. What it was, was a cloud of
19 mosquitoes.

20 KC: Oh my.

21 RP: I mean a real cloud. And so just as we landed at Nom Can, this cloud hit us
22 and so we all ran, got off and ran for I remember an open kind of—I wouldn't call it a
23 restaurant area, but people came there for tea and that kind of stuff, and they had smoke
24 pots underneath the tables to keep the mosquitoes away. So, what I remember is
25 somehow we found our way to one of these places and so we got out from under the
26 mosquito cloud, but the people had no mosquito nets, nothing. And how the hell they
27 survived; I don't know because I remember going to bed that night and we did have
28 mosquito netting, but those mosquitoes were so hungry and so loud that they came up
29 under this canvas cot and I am sleeping on the canvas cot and I've got a mosquito net
30 over the canvas cot; but it's like I am sleeping on top of an electric turbine because

1 you've got hundreds and hundreds of mosquitoes trying to come up through the canvas, if
2 you can imagine.

3 KC: No, I can't. thank goodness.

4 RP: Yeah. Well, it was so thick when we landed that you could literally wipe your
5 hands down and you could see some daylight, that's how bad it was. So, that was
6 immediate and then there was just this tremendous need for medical service. The town of
7 Ca Mau itself had been bombed by the French repeatedly and so some buildings were
8 still standing, and Operation Brotherhood occupied one of these and they brought a
9 generator, but we couldn't get the generator going so it was pretty tough at night. I
10 remember a patient, a woman who arrived who was about to die because her birth canal
11 was obstructed, and she couldn't give birth and there was no anesthetic except ether and
12 so they were giving her ether and I was one of the guys holding a flashlight so the
13 surgeon could operate. This was what the Filipino doctors were doing in those
14 circumstances, and it saved that woman's life and saved her baby's life, and they sort of
15 adopted the baby for a while. But anyway, that's sort of the human side of it, but I think
16 stuff like that began to cement a relationship between the population and the Vietnamese
17 army. The Viet Minh had told them that the Army was going to come in and rape and
18 pillage and so forth; so, when the population saw how things were being done and that
19 they were actually being helped, you saw changed in attitude and a lack of fear.

20 KC: They were receptive towards you.

21 RP: Yeah, also the commander was careful not to offend or try to offend the fact
22 that part of the support that the communist had, had to do mainly with resistance against
23 the French and so he let the Viet Minh resurrect some monuments, moralizing their fight
24 against the French and he let those stand. And he was very careful not to attack the Viet
25 Minh directly, but simply to begin offering a contrast in behavior.

26 KC: Like a legitimate nationalist effort.

27 RP: That's right.

28 KC: For the Vietnamese, not the French. Yeah, and certainly not American
29 because you sort of have to keep a low profile while you're here.

1 RP: Well, I was in civvies. I was not in uniform, and I think they passed me off as
2 a foreign correspondent or whatever. I was distinctly not an advisor and distinctly not a
3 military advisor.

4 KC: How do you go about doing these kinds of things Rufus? Say if it's mosquito
5 netting or if it's to build up—

6 RP: Well, I had direct communication, not with Saigon, it was sort of a relay up
7 to—there was a Col. Kerrick who remained behind in the point of kick off with this
8 operation and he was relaying my messages up to Saigon. The Vietnamese army had
9 aircraft, so as soon as they could get the airfield in decent shape, but they started flying in
10 stuff and before that they dropped stuff by parachute, so that is how we were able to get
11 supplies such as mosquito nets down there. And then, the Filipino medical teams of
12 Operations Brotherhood, they were carrying all their stuff with them.

13 KC: What do you do down here on a regular basis? On a daily basis I should say,
14 Rufus. From the time you wake up to the time you curl underneath your mosquito
15 netting again for the night, what do you do for a daily basis here? What is your routine?

16 RP: Well, I would go out. I had a Vietnamese friend who was in the Army who
17 was down there with me. So, I would say let's go out, they had a psywar company and I
18 would say, "let's go out and see what they are doing" and then I would ask him to
19 translate what the messages were that were coming over. They set up loudspeaker
20 systems and they would be broadcasting favorable commentary about who they were,
21 what they were trying to do, et cetera. And I would go around and see how effective was
22 this and I would try to check in on soldier attitudes towards the population and sometimes
23 I would get him to talk to a Vietnamese farmer and ask him some indirect questions to try
24 to determine attitudes. Then, when I got a feel or came across some problems, I would go
25 into the commander of the operation and tell him about it. What I had seen, what I
26 thought. So, he would take that into account because it was all done on a very friendly
27 and informal basis and so I would. And I think in some ways he started using me as his
28 eyes and ears and by this time I had become fairly acclimated to being in a Vietnamese
29 environment because I had been spending so much time with the Vietnamese that I had
30 come back and would go into MAAG and spend time with Americans and the Americans
31 seemed stranger to me than the Vietnamese (laughing).

1 KC: Well, I think that's an important part of your experience there and the
2 success that you had there was this receptiveness you had to the Vietnamese culture and
3 were kind of able to home in on it pretty quickly it seems like. And again, and you are a
4 second lieutenant, a young man down there.

5 RP: Yeah, well maybe being young, I don't know. I guess I did have an ability to
6 listen and learn. And I had made some friends early on in the psywar company and
7 among civilians in Diem's government. And I spent a lot of time asking them questions
8 about what motivated the Viet Minh, tell me what's important, what do the Vietnamese
9 feel is really important. And I learned a lot of practical stuff about the importance they
10 placed on trust and friendship and family. I don't know, I guess it was kind of an osmosis
11 situation in which I was very dependent on them and trying to learn as fast as I could
12 about Vietnam and its culture, but it's culture in a very personal way. I discovered if you
13 listen and spend time with the Vietnamese, you begin to earn trust and once you earn
14 trust you and you really learn stuff. Otherwise, they would be very indirect, and you
15 would have to figure out the indirectness. If you've dealt with Asians in general I think a
16 lot of it has to do with emotion and feeling and very often not what's said and I learned
17 that you didn't get answers sometimes particularly about political things if you ask direct
18 questions, you had to ask indirect questions. Sometimes, when they wouldn't answer a
19 question that told you something. It's just, I don't know, and this is in the book, I tried to
20 trace this back as to how I seemed to have some ability to understand the Vietnamese and
21 who don't look like me and weren't like me and I traced it back to my boyhood and I
22 don't know if this is right or wrong, but for the first five or six years actually of my life,
23 my only friends were two black kids who lived on the place I did down on the southside
24 of Virginia and it seems to me that I always felt comfortable not only with African-
25 Americans, but also with people who didn't look like me. So, maybe that helped me kind
26 of integrate myself into the Vietnamese and then I had very strong feelings and developed
27 those feelings that I was there to help them, and their future and their freedom was an
28 integral part of what I believed in. I think Lansdale contributed a lot to that because he
29 always talked about American history in terms of how he thought it applied to the
30 situation in Vietnam.

1 KC: And there you are on the point of the spear I guess. Trying to help in a very
2 practical sense in bringing this thing about.

3 RP: That's right.

4 KC: What about the Vietnamese politically? How would you describe the
5 Vietnamese in the Ca Mau Peninsula in terms of politics? Were they receptive to a larger
6 national government? Were they—?

7 RP: No, I think they were very—they were susceptible to any government that
8 cared about them. That could shift allegiances, but it had to be consistently demonstrated
9 to earn some trust there and I think the Vietnamese villagers had been subject to war and
10 difficulties and had not been ready to trust anybody unless they could see some
11 consistency in what was happening with them. But people everywhere, they responded to
12 kindness, they responded to respect and that's almost in my experience at least, universal.
13 And so, it just took them time to believe that this was for real and that it just wasn't
14 another army coming in and occupying a place and then moving on and still leaving
15 exposed to a very uncertain life and uncertain environment.

16 KC: Like you say, consistency here is going to be a huge part of it. How do you
17 tie this into the national government in Saigon? You mentioned psy-work and of course
18 the army is behind this, but are there any other political efforts? In America we would
19 say, "this brought to you by the Democratic Party of the United States" or something like
20 that. Was there any effort to try and create this tie between the Civic Action to the Diem
21 Government?

22 RP: Yeah, there was a lot of propaganda and part of them was to build Diem up
23 himself as a leader of South Vietnam. So, one of the things that the Army did was they
24 had photographs of Diem and they would trade them in for the villages giving up the
25 photographs of Ho Chi Minh and replacing them with photographs of Diem. And it was
26 that kind of effort at that low level. And then the psywar company would put on plays
27 that were illustrations out of Vietnamese history that would illustrate a point about what
28 was the difference between the Diem government and how they were dealing with the
29 people and the Viet Minh because what happened was that once the war was over, the
30 Viet Minh regime was pretty oppressive. And they weren't providing any services at all,
31 so the fact that the government, and that would include Operation Brotherhood, were

1 providing services and help that the population very much needed was a contrast and so,
2 there were some propaganda exploitations of that in terms of making a contrast in talking
3 about it.

4 KC: You're certainly playing the long game down here, but it has to be played,
5 clearly.

6 RP: Yeah because you are not going to turn around public opinion overnight and
7 so the idea was to show that this government is better than the Viet Minh rule and now
8 we have a peaceful environment for a while. So, let's fill that kind of vacuum with
9 government presence and government help. And it very much focused on what's the
10 political impact of this, so that it wasn't just we're giving aid, but we're giving aid
11 because.

12 KC: Do you suspect, this question just popped in my mind, do you suspect that
13 there were any Viet Minh hold outs down there?

14 RP: Oh, yeah.

15 KC: Really? Tell me about that.

16 RP: They left stay behind folks. Maybe mostly political cadre because from the
17 North's point of view—and they were issuing the commands and instructions—they
18 thought that the South was going to fall into their hands anyway either through the
19 election process or it would just collapse internally. So, they were kind of resting on their
20 laurels and counting on that happening. And so, there was an opportunity there to do
21 something positive, to offer a contrast and I think that was fairly effective.

22 KC: Did you make any effort to try to sniff out who these folks were?

23 RP: Not at the time. The Vietnamese Army did, but they went hiding their hand
24 pretty much. You didn't see them openly agitated, they had just kind of gone
25 underground. In anticipation of the fact that the North would eventually take over, this
26 was the message that was being given to them. There was a group, however, of active
27 Viet Minh. The cadres were not just propaganda folks, they were all armed propaganda
28 folks and there was a location up at the upper part of the Ca Mau Peninsula in the swamp
29 area called U Minh Ha. There they were sequestered in that area and they remained there
30 sort of out of sight and eventually became the nucleus of the eventual resistance
31 movement which came to the fore later in 1959, 1960.

1 KC: And of course, the U Minh would be a difficult place when the Americans
2 arrive.

3 RP: Well, that was a whole other thing.

4 KC: Yeah.

5 RP: And there was one thing, the Vietnamese did miss that. There was a guy over
6 in that area who had been a leader of the initial Viet Minh resistance, but then he became
7 disenchanted sort of the menace of being obliged to join the Lao Dong Party which was
8 the Vietnamese Communist Party. So, he sort of retired to his farm, he wasn't wealthy;
9 and I ran into him, and he eventually became the delegate for that whole area under Diem
10 and that was a wise move because he was a legitimate Vietnamese nationalist who had
11 fought the French, but became opposed to the communist control of the Viet Minh. So,
12 there were some political moves there that were good and that was one of them because
13 he was fairly widely respected.

14 KC: Yeah, the bone fide.

15 RP: Yeah, and he encouraged the government to try and penetrate the U Minh Ha,
16 but that was one issue that kind of got left behind and ignored.

17 KC: Why do you suppose that was?

18 RP: Well, there were so many other things going on. And then there was the
19 whole revolt of sex and the war in Saigon and the attempt to push them out and all that,
20 that other than devolving some responsibility out to the commander who actually ran this
21 operation down in Ca Mau; if the government and Diem himself had more time and could
22 have devoted more attention to what was going on I think some of the issues that existed
23 there, particularly the U Minh Ha area problem would have been tackled. But here was a
24 government in April and May of 1955 fighting for its very existence in Saigon.

25 KC: Sure. You've got to pick your battles, there are only so many resources.

26 RP: That's right. And not a lot of the experienced folks to depend on either.

27 KC: Good point, yeah. It required an awful lot of effort and an awful lot of
28 expenditure to root that out there even without the troubles going on in Saigon which
29 were legion force. How long were you working down here in the Ca Mau here on this
30 operation?

1 RP: I went in the 8th of February, it was sometime in March that I came back up,
2 had written up lessons from that experience that were translated into Vietnamese and
3 circulated around. We were preparing for the turnover of this vast area in Central
4 Vietnam and that became a big job, so I became involved in the planning for that and
5 implementation of a national security decree and particularly in coming up with a training
6 program for the troops to go into Central Vietnam, so I kind of left Ca Mau behind and
7 became very deeply involved in that. The staff that I started working with was a
8 Vietnamese colonel, Le Van Kim, who was a really bright guy. He had actually grown up
9 in France and been a part of the French army that had been captured by the Germans. He
10 was repatriated to Vietnam, and he was really a brilliant guy. He caught on to the whole
11 Civic Action thing right away, the French had some ideas that were pretty good; the
12 problem was that it was the French implementing them, not the Vietnamese.

13 KC: And that is huge from what you have seen both in what happened in the
14 Philippines and what the French had done here is very stark relief as I understand it.

15 RP: Well, yeah. For the Vietnamese to go over and see that the Filipinos were
16 running everything, not the Americans was part of the effect that Lansdale wanted to
17 achieve because he realized that the Vietnamese's more natural inclination was not
18 necessarily trust the Americans either. So, that was a kind of a valuable part of this whole
19 association that was built up between the Philippines and Filipinos and the Vietnamese.

20 KC: Tell me about these lessons learned that you take away from the Ca Mau
21 effort and attempt to apply them up in Central Vietnam. What were these lessons and
22 how were you going to apply them up there?

23 RP: Well, I think the biggest lesson was that the army wasn't well enough
24 prepared for the job. And another lesson was we needed, if we could get them, some kind
25 of civilians to along with the army to help set up local government. There was quite a
26 strain on just the army doing it, but the main lesson was the need for very intensive
27 indoctrination program and for the troops going in, a very clear guidelines as to how they
28 were going to operate, improving the whole logistics system and much more detailed
29 planning that went on for the occupation in the south because the thing up in Central
30 Vietnam became more complicated because access was very difficult and so troops had
31 to be landed on the beaches and that required a lot more coordination at the upper

1 military advisory level, which included the French because the French had the ships. So,
2 the planning was just much more detailed than the whole operation before and it showed
3 up rather rapidly as the troops—the way it was done, sections of the area which is called
4 interzone fire were to be evacuated in steps and so the troops would evacuate part of the
5 zone going north to south and then the troops would move into that area. Then there was
6 another part, and the troops would move into that area. So, there were about four different
7 tranches or sections going from north to south of an area only contained over a million
8 people that were being evacuated successfully by the Viet Minh. And then there was a
9 French force that was supposed to kind of be a buffer between the Vietnamese Army and
10 the Viet Minh, so they were the ones that were kind of in charge of ensuring there was
11 not a lot of friction in the change from zone to zone.

12 KC: I wonder, did it matter if the civilians—you wanted more civilians working,
13 but did you want civilians who would work with you as well as the army troops
14 themselves. Did it help to have the civilians interfacing with the military who was from
15 that area? Did you ever make any effort or look at having people from a particular district
16 work with others in that district?

17 RP: No, unfortunately the Vietnamese Civil Service, were mainly bureaucrats that
18 had been in offices and didn't have any field experience. So, it was a disappointing aspect
19 of the occupation was the military wound up doing almost all, not only the occupying,
20 but the initial governing and it was only gradually that civilians were sent in to gradually
21 change over to civilian control. Out of that however, that vacuum came the Civilian Civic
22 Action Program which is a whole other thing that I got involved in after this occupation
23 in the center. And there was a deliberate effort to go out and train civilian teams to go out
24 and work in the villages. And that was sort of an outgrowth of what was a disappointing
25 experience in the occupations of that part of Central Vietnam.

26 KC: Sure, sure.

27 RP: There was just no folks available.

28 KC: Tell me about Col Kim. I know you and he became close friends. Tell me
29 more about this gentleman.

30 RP: Well, he came from a family of landowners in Central Vietnam, and he had
31 then been raised largely in France and had entered the French Army. He had gone

1 through what was amounted to France's West Point and had been commissioned an
2 officer just as the Germans invaded. Of course, he was a part of the loosing French Army
3 and was then turned in the south and then the Germans and Vichy Government took over
4 in the French Colonies, so he was repatriated back to Vietnam, and he became part of the
5 initial creation of a Vietnamese army and rose through the ranks because he was brilliant.
6 But for a time, before he became involved in the French Army, he was the lead for a
7 French movie maker named Marshall Tanole, one of the great directors. And he became
8 an associate director in the film industry in France. He was just a brilliant guy, a terrific
9 mind and wonderful human being. When I met him, his French was so good I thought he
10 was really a pseudo-Frenchman, but he turned out to be at his heart a Vietnamese
11 nationalist. We just developed a friendship. I remember of course that he was sort of
12 astonished that I was a young second lieutenant and put off initially by why they are
13 assigning this guy to help him, and I just listened a lot and learned from him and we
14 became very, very close friends. And then, one of the instances that kind of cemented our
15 friendship was at one point we needed bridging material and we were not getting much
16 response from Saigon. He was flying back to Saigon, and he gave me a seat on a plane,
17 and we arrived there at the same time. We were going down; he was to meet up down in
18 the MAAG headquarters which is down in Cholon which is the Chinese part of Saigon. I
19 went with Lansdale and the war in Saigon had already started, so we get to the MAAG
20 Headquarters, we pass the Binh Xuyen, which was a gangster sect had taken over. Their
21 leader, his brother was the chief of police, and they had their own military equipment and
22 jeeps and everything else and they had their own outpost. We go by this outpost and see
23 all these beady eyes, no one was shooting in that particular part of the border between
24 Saigon and Cholon. I just remember going by silently, all you could hear was the sound
25 of the tires in the street. We get down to Viet Minh headquarters, we're having this
26 meeting with Gen Daniel who was in his office and all hell breaks loose. This outpost is
27 under attack by the Vietnamese, so we are all slinking down in our seats because bullets
28 are going through the window, and they were yelling at each other because of all the
29 noise (laughing). Anyway, we were able to conclude the meeting, we offered Kim a ride
30 back to somewhere near his house. We go by that post and what we see is guns lying
31 around and the Binh Xuyen had these berets scattered around on the sidewalk and the

1 post was quiet. So, we get close to where he lived, and he gets out and says he is going to
2 walk. I said, "are you sure?" And he said, "Yeah." So, I had a pistol that I carried around
3 with me stuck in my waistband and he didn't have an arm, so I just gave it to him, and I
4 think in some ways that gesture kind of cemented a friendship and relationship there. It's
5 just a very personal thing. And then he came to the commanding general's staff school
6 later on out in Kansas and he paid a visit to Washington. I took him down to Mount
7 Vernon and we just talked about American history and what I thought was a struggle for
8 freedom, and just, you know, we became close to being blood brothers.

9 KC: Let's go ahead and stop here for today.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [4] of [14]
April 25, 2006

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips, today is 12 November 2020. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 joining me by telephone again from Virginia. Rufus, you had a pretty successful
4 operation by all standards down in the Delta and there is another effort later on that year
5 up in Central Vietnam. Tell me about this, Operation Dai Phong. Tell me about this, how
6 did this come about and what lessons did you learn in attempting to implement this for
7 the country?

8 Rufus Philips: Well, there was this large area which encompassed two provinces
9 in Central Vietnam, two coastal provinces that had been held by the Viet Minh for nine
10 years. The French had attempted an operation to take that area back, but they had relied
11 on French soldiers mainly and had given the Vietnamese no role and they did have some
12 past location ideas, but it was undercut by the fact that the French were doing it. So, it
13 had not been successful, and this was just as strong a base area for the communist as the
14 south part of Vietnam. The way it was set up by the agreement, not the Geneva Accords
15 themselves, but there was this military agreement reached between the French and North
16 Vietnamese that the area would be evacuated by sections, starting from north to south and
17 ending in the port city of Qui Yon and that every two weeks the section would be
18 evacuated, and the Vietnamese forces would move south. What became apparent from
19 the operation in the south was that the troops needed a lot more indoctrination and there
20 needed to be a lot more preparation for the operation. The Chief of Staff of the Army of
21 Gen. Kim with whom I had worked with on preparing the occupation of Ca Mau, became
22 the head of the operation itself. And he was very sold on ideas that he had developed
23 personally about Civic Action as well as I think reacting to some of our own influences.
24 So, he developed this very intensive course for commanders and there was a very
25 intensive indoctrination course for all the troops before the occupation started. It had
26 gotten down to actual detailed instructions and not only that, but also play acting out
27 different situations between the troops and the population that might fall. And that meant
28 you had someone in charge who understood the psychological/political implications of
29 troop behavior. So, what happened was I accompanied again as a sole 'advisor' with Kim

1 on this operation and stayed with him and went with him as he went south. What was
2 really interesting was the Viet Minh as they had in the south, had told the population that
3 the troops would come in and steal from them and misbehave. In fact, the troops were
4 doing the opposite, so the word went out and even the head knew they were going in. So,
5 initially the population was of course quite reserved, but eventually they came out and
6 welcomed the troops and had civilians volunteering to bring water out; this is in the
7 middle of the dry season where it gets up to 120 degrees in the sun sometimes because
8 there are no clouds. A bond began to be developed between the civilian population and
9 the troops as they marched out and everything was very orderly, there were no incidents,
10 none that were ever reported, and I went out and went back to talk to people at lower
11 levels. And the Viet Minh cadre, some of them were still behind and as a result of the
12 operation, a large number of arms caches that they left behind that we discovered. Some
13 of the people were identified as cadre, but nobody was arrested initially unless they
14 started doing something untoward. So, then the question became as the operation grew to
15 a close, was how this was going to be transferred to the civilian authority. There the
16 operation fell short, the idea was to try to organize teams of civilian administrators to
17 accompany the troops, but there were none to be had. And out of that would grow the
18 idea of civilian Civic Action which was implemented later on in terms of creating civilian
19 teams to send out to the villages. All this occurred while the struggle in Saigon to throw
20 Diem out reached a climax. Lansdale had made a contact early in 1954 with a Cao Dai
21 General who did not go along with the French and in fact fought both the French and the
22 communists and helped him bring together in support of President Diem and all of his
23 troops, refurbished the money to Diem and Diem started paying the money to Bao Dai
24 troops. These guys had been operating on a shoestring with no particular resources and he
25 was a really interesting character because he just lived simply as a soldier and obviously
26 had tremendous support in that region which was where the stronghold of the religious
27 sect called the Cao Dai was and he's coming in to support the government and integrate
28 his troops into the national army. (inaudible) Particularly the Binh Xuyen, who were
29 essentially a gangster sect to whom Bao Dai had sold the control of the national police, so
30 the head of the Binh Xuyen's brother ran the national police. And they were very strong
31 in the Saigon area and all the way down to the coast because the French trained and

1 armed them as a force opposing the Viet Minh and they were really in nominal control of
2 Saigon in addition there was a religious Hoa Hao down in the Delta in one particular
3 province and it would be a revolutionary leader named Ba Cut and Ba Cut had gone back
4 and forth between fighting the French and opposing them and then helping the French.
5 He rebelled and part of the Hao rebelled and formed a contortion. Part of the Cao Dai that
6 didn't support turned to the Binh Xuyen and the Hoa Hao and tried to force Diem out of
7 office. Well, that didn't work and eventually this war broke out in Saigon during the
8 initial phases of this operation, Dai Phong, and I only became involved in it peripherally
9 because Kim and I separately flew back to Saigon to try and get some support for the
10 operation, particularly bridge building materials because there were a number of rivers
11 that bisected the provinces falling into this area to see where the Viet Minh had blown up
12 the bridges. In one case a bridge had actually been blown up from American forces from
13 the air and it had never been repaired. So, we all came down to Saigon, he and I, on this
14 mission out to—have I told you this already?

15 KC: You mentioned something about it earlier about the meeting and all the
16 shooting—

17 RP: Oh yeah. When I went to this meeting. What happened was the army really
18 rallied to Diem cause and this drove the Binh Xuyen right out of Saigon and into the
19 swamps and eventually took care of the anti-Hao forces. A real tragedy occurred when
20 Kim went down personally to lead his own people who had become part of the national
21 army and he was killed apparently by a sniper so far as we know. And that hurt the effort
22 because he really was a distinctive personality and a real force in support of Diem.
23 Anyway, the war in Saigon was resolved with Diem firmly in control just as the operation
24 in Central Vietnam concluded and one of the interesting things that happened at the end
25 was Diem sent work to Gen. Kim that he wanted to come up and visit and this was about
26 a week after the operation had concluded. Of course, there were no preparations, but he
27 came anyway and had this tremendous, spontaneous reaction from the population, the
28 reason is that the *Armed Forces Radio* had been on the air and people did have some
29 radio receivers, the population did in this area, and they heard about the fight in Saigon.
30 And of course, it was picture day as the French were trying to take control again, working
31 through the Binh Xuyen and the Hoa Hao and I think that added to the support that the

1 Army had gotten from the population. Also, Diem was known in Central Vietnam as a
2 Vietnamese nationalist who had never cooperated with the French. The result was he
3 received this incredible reception and that was the first time I met him because Lansdale
4 had told him I was the only American up there and they had assembled a crowd and
5 constructed a little, I would call it a grandstand, it was just some seats in back of the
6 microphone where Diem spoke, and they put up some loudspeakers. And he asked
7 somebody to find me, and he did and that's when I first met him and shook his hand, and
8 he thanked me for what we as Americans were doing. So, I took photographs of that, and
9 they appear in my book.

10 KC: This is a really important moment I think, when you say the battle of Saigon
11 is winding down—or for Saigon is a better way to put it as well as having these two
12 success stories down in Ca Mau and the Qui Yon area. So, you kind of have this opening
13 moment of “here’s our guy, here’s our leader.” And he was very well accepted at this
14 time, so it was a pretty big moment there it seems to me.

15 RP: Oh yeah. That was I think a very keen moment in the move toward South
16 Vietnamese independence and Diem’s consolidation of support. And of course, that was
17 followed by the election of constitutional assembly, writing of the constitution, et cetera,
18 et cetera. Lansdale only really understood the political side of this whole conflict. He had
19 been key because there was a point, Gen. Collins had come out and he tended to be
20 influenced by the French point of view because Gen. Ayleigh had been a personal friend
21 during WWII and Ayleigh was in command of all French forces and was in effect, the
22 acting governor general, a position that no longer exists. So, he was very much
23 influenced by Ayleigh and thought that Diem was the wrong guy and recommended that
24 he be replaced. But Lansdale in his reporting through a series of cable, changed the
25 opinions of the government back in Washington. That was also very much a key to what
26 happened, and I remember, this was happening while I was staying at Lansdale’s house
27 and I remember him staying up all night and writing one of these critical cables. I didn’t
28 know that at the time, but it was about fifteen pages long of single spaced, typed in which
29 he did not change a word, if you could imagine (Crager laughs).

30 KC: That’s pretty incredible.

1 RP: It was all reporting on what was really going on the local scene because the
2 war in Saigon wasn't in full. And the embassy was back in Washington, the embassy was
3 just afraid for itself, the charge'd didn't want to report anything that seemed contradictory
4 to Collins's point of view. Collins had gone back to persuade Eisenhower to drop Diem,
5 those of us actually drafted a cable to send out those instructions, I mean the whole thing
6 was at a real tipping point. And here it was being changed by one guys, staying up
7 practically half the night and writing this incredible cable. It showed both his talent for
8 understanding and his ability to write, clearly and succinctly. And of course, as running a
9 separate CIA station he had his own channels and that was an agency cable that went
10 back to the agency. But then, (inaudible) disseminated that directly to his brother who
11 was Secretary of State and that had a real influence on the outcome. I did not know all, I
12 saw him at work, but I had no idea what was going on at that level at that particular time.

13 KC: Yeah, if you can change the mind of the Secretary of State against the advice
14 of an ambassador of Vietnam, it's really an impressive—

15 RP: Yeah, and J. Lawton Collins, who you know had great influence and respect
16 as a tremendous WWII leader.

17 KC: Tell me about Diem. Who was this man? Tell me about his characteristics,
18 his leadership, give me a good idea of who this guy was.

19 RP: Well, first of all, he was a traditional Vietnamese. To him, Vietnamese
20 traditions meant a lot and he had had experience as a province chief, so he had some feel
21 for working with the Vietnamese people. But because of his opposition to the French, he
22 had gone into exile, he had at one point considered becoming a priest. He came to the
23 United States, he had been befriended by a guy named Wesley Fishel who was a
24 professor out a Michigan State and he had become sort of self-isolated until he was
25 appointed by Bao Dai as prime minister as sort of a last gesture I think towards
26 Vietnamese nationalists. And he was a very reticent, reserved person, with tremendous
27 intellectual capacity and also he knew just about everything there was to know about the
28 Vietnamese and the Montagnard tribes on top of it. He tended to go into long monologues
29 with Americans because he felt they didn't know much about Vietnam, which was
30 generally true, and he would have to explain it. I remember, this was later on this was just
31 an incident when I went back and '62 to do this survey as an aide involved in

1 counterinsurgency and I had found out—this is describing a little bit of his character and
2 also the problem that developed within the regime itself. I found out that rice had been
3 stockpiled in a couple of provinces for distribution to Montagnard refugees who were
4 fleeing the Viet Cong. And it wasn't being distributed because word had not come down
5 from the top to do so. And of course, he asked me what I had seen, so I reported this to
6 him. He got angry, called up the Minister of Interior right on the spot. And the rice got
7 distributed, but it was also obvious that the regime was terribly overcentralized, and he
8 was making a lot of the decisions himself and nobody would operate independently. The
9 other thing that became apparent of course was he trusted and depended too much on his
10 brothers and they were very influential. One was a principal bishop in Central Vietnam
11 and the other lived in the palace and became not only his political advisor but ran the
12 whole intelligence operation and created this come out party which was designed to
13 ensure loyalty to Diem but became terribly divisive. But he was absolutely honest and
14 full of that kind of integrity. One of the influences on him was he knew so much about
15 the families of everybody else that as I said he tended to be influenced by that and the
16 family history. So, the family history had been good, whoever was a descendent of that
17 was good, and if the family history was bad—I mean I think that was kind of typical of
18 Vietnamese thinking. I am sorry I missed recounting one of the results of my bringing to
19 his attention this race problem was he then spent I think almost two hours explaining to
20 me the whole of the Montagnard tribes, who they were, what their history was, where
21 they were located. I mean (laughs), one of his verses was his vast knowledge and one of
22 his defects was he tended to get involved in all the details of things. And he was not
23 naturally charismatic. Lansdale had wanted him to get out and talk to people and he did a
24 lot of that in the early days. Then, in 1957 there was an assassination attempt made
25 against him on a visit to the high plateau and thereafter under the influence of his brother,
26 I think the whole thing became too protective of him rather than getting him more and
27 more exposed to people and what the hell was really going on at the local level. You
28 know, what came through to me in a whole series of contact, I had much more contact
29 with him later on was his essential decency. And he would listen if I gave him opinions
30 contrary to what he was hearing from his brothers or some other sources. But he would
31 get a little defensive too about that claiming he had lots of different sources for

1 information. But when I say traditional Vietnamese you don't in dealing with traditional
2 Vietnamese, you say a lot by indirection, you don't say a lot by direction and you don't
3 directly contradict them, it's offensive. So, in that sense he was a traditional Vietnamese
4 and a lot American officials grew impatient with him. We're not very good listeners,
5 we're not loath to tell him what to do which aroused resentment because of the way the
6 French had treated him and so many other Vietnamese. It was being taken as a colonial
7 attitude. So, he would get his back up about that. He was not an easy person to deal with
8 and you had to influence him indirectly, not directly. But Lansdale, had a very unique
9 talent for dealing with Asians difficult, not difficult. And somehow sensing how to talk to
10 him in ways that could be persuasive or at least create some doubt that they were totally
11 being well informed and establish a kind of mutual sense of confidence that the person,
12 the westerner talking to him was not interested in advancing his own career, but only
13 interested in helping him understand and deal with his own country. And that made a lot
14 of difference.

15 KC: Does it make a difference for you? If you are seen as Lansdale's guy, does
16 that help you with Diem?

17 RP: Oh yeah, it helped me a lot. But then I had to prove that I was worthy of
18 being considered Lansdale's guy by being able to listen and to evident some understand
19 of what it was they were trying to tell me and some empathy for their difficulties. So,
20 there was a tired and true kind of technique for doing that, one of them was to talk to
21 people about your own problems and then they'd start talking to you about theirs.

22 KC: It strikes me that the more Washington gets involved in the affairs there in
23 Saigon like you mentioned the President is strongly influenced by his brother. The more
24 the United States demands of Diem in terms of whatever it might be, the more like you
25 said, you're not talking to him in the proper way he gets a little bit defensive about this it
26 would seem and he becomes more isolated and insulated from these things which kind of
27 led to that downward spiral I guess in confidence in Washington in his ability to keep
28 things together, at least the way they wanted them to.

29 RP: Yeah, there was just, my old friend Diem who I got to know in 1954, he was
30 former ambassador to the US and very, very active politically in Vietnam. He said the
31 biggest problem was just the lack of understanding between the Americans and the

1 Vietnamese and he meant the official Americans and Vietnamese. And I found it very
2 difficult as he explained things to the Americans. To me sometimes, maybe fairly often I
3 thought I understood the Vietnamese better than I understood the Americans. That sound
4 funny but I believed it was true.

5 KC: Of course, there are a myriad of difficulties once the United States becomes
6 much more fully invested in this with the assassination in November of '63. Before we
7 get to that, I want your opinion, tell me about the French. The role the French played in
8 this really critical period of 1955, 1956, obviously they are not in support of Diem as you
9 said they were basically paying this gangster sect, the French did not want to go out
10 quietly is what it seemed to me. Tell me about their role in this critical period.

11 RP: Well, they were the typically dog in the manger. There was just a lot of
12 resentment over the fact that we were in effect replacing the French in the principal role
13 of supporter and advisor on Vietnamese affairs. And that just rankled personally, it
14 sounds funny to say that, but it certainly effected principal policy. And the French had a
15 superior attitude towards the Vietnamese. I mean you had the French prime minister
16 saying Vietnam was never really a country and there was never really any coherence
17 among the Vietnamese and stuff like that and a lot of them believed it. And particularly
18 there were a group of folks who had been very influential over time, and this felt they
19 knew better about what the Vietnamese needed and wanted and were capable of. I think
20 that a lot of what occurred was based on this personal resentment. I experienced it when I
21 was working in TRIM (Training Relations and Instruction Mission) in the National
22 Security Division because we had French officers to work under Lansdale. There was one
23 as deputy who was a different kind of Frenchman who had real sympathy for the
24 Vietnamese, but the others were all intelligence who were assigned to basically watch us,
25 not to do anything helpful for the Vietnamese. And then the Vietnamese, I have to say,
26 provoked some of this too. Like there was a Vietnamese national day that they created I
27 think it was in February of '55 in which the Vietnamese military had a parade in Saigon
28 and there were Americans and French sitting in the stand and the Vietnamese had gotten
29 ahold of the American Manual of Arms and so this one particular group that had been
30 trained, they get in front of the stands and what do they do? They don't execute what had
31 been the Vietnamese Army, the French Manual of Arms of course, they actually did the

1 American Manual of Arms, and you could hear the teeth grinding and mashing in the
2 stands. I mean, so they would rub it in, the standing story was a hypocritical story of say,
3 you are a Frenchman, and you are sitting at a sidewalk café in Saigon. And along comes
4 this Cadillac car with a chauffeur and seated in back is this beautiful Vietnamese mistress
5 accompanied by this American officer and you are a French officer and how the hell
6 would you feel (laughs). And that was your previous girlfriend.

7 KC: The French as I understand it put up as many roadblocks as they felt they
8 could get away with in any number of situations.

9 RP: Well, what they did is they lied to Gen. Ayleigh. I think he was a decent guy,
10 but they were providing it with provocative information and the hostility got to the point
11 in which the French were blowing up American cars and trying to blame it on
12 Vietnamese elements who wanted the Americans to go home. I talk about that in my
13 book, that occurred in '54, '55.

14 KC: I read about that. It was a shock, I had no idea the enmity had gotten that bad
15 and the French resentment, to go to those kinds of steps. By the way, since that happened
16 and we're on that story, go ahead and finish out that story for me if you would please. It
17 came to a pretty quick halt through the actions of one individual. Can you take me
18 through that?

19 RP: Yeah. Well, those was Luke Minh, who certainly was a unique individual. I
20 tried describing because, you know, he had a hot temper, he had a way of expressing
21 himself, he had a presence which was sort of intimidating when I met him first and then I
22 got to know him as a human being and another side of him, other sides of him in regard
23 to both his family and children and in general. There was a gentler side, but it wasn't
24 apparent in what I would call his public personality and he decided to take matters into
25 his own hands to what extend he ever told Lansdale what he was doing I never got that
26 information clear. But I had come back from the operation, and I was staying temporarily
27 in a house that had been acquired for a bunch of Lansdale's team members and I went
28 down to the kitchen, and I find Lou with blocks of C3, an explosive that was a plastic
29 explosive, prima chord, and fuses making what amounted to bombs. So, I said, "What the
30 hell are you doing?" and he said, "You don't want to know. You can help out by taping
31 some of this prima chord to these blocks of plastic." So, I did that for a while and then I

1 forgot about it. Well, what he did was he went out with his girlfriend who became his
2 wife and she drove the car and he knew exactly who the ringleaders were of this bombing
3 of American cars. Which was also wound up by the bombing of the US Information
4 Library. So, he just flipped these pumps inside the compounds of the individuals
5 involved. And then for some reason he throws one into the yard of the French
6 ambassador and goes home, doesn't say a damn word. Well, of course, the guys, the folks
7 who were behind it on the French side get the message and all hell breaks loose because
8 nobody knows who did this. So, the French bombing stopped almost immediately, I mean
9 it stopped period.

10 KC: (Crager laughing) You're really working with a cast of characters there.

11 RP: Oh yeah.

12 KC: And of course. That brings me to another topic I would like you to discuss
13 for me. We kind of nibbled at it earlier talking about Gen. Collins and his influence or
14 being influenced and what they wanted in something other than Diem. What sort of
15 American organizations did you run into? USOM for example, and what role did they
16 play? Did you find a cooperative environment with these other bureaucracies that were
17 there? Or was it more difficult to work with them?

18 RP: Well, the USOM, that was the agency that was ICA then. They were very
19 much involved in helping the refugees resettle and initially in '54 I found a number of
20 then that had been out in the countryside willing to cooperate. But there was a lot of fear.
21 I requested some medical kits which they had sort of a thing that you could put in a
22 village, that basic medicine center and if you train Vietnamese nurses they could use this.
23 I requested some medical kits for some of the psywar teams that the Army had, they
24 could put a trained nurse with it and I encountered initial resistance because what
25 appeared was that it would all fall into Viet Minh hands and that was just a part of the
26 overall confusion. So, I did get some support, but most of the civilian agencies, the
27 regular agencies and even most of MAAG was pretty detached from the Vietnamese
28 scene. The aid agency had been allowed to work directly with the Vietnamese, but the
29 military were there in support as advisors to the French and were not allowed to be direct
30 advisors to the Vietnamese. This is a situation up to the Geneva Accords, which began to
31 change in early '55 with the set-up of what we called TRIM, which was a combined

1 American-Vietnamese advisory group headed by the Americans. But before that, there
2 were a few exceptions. The Americans were not allowed to get very close to the
3 Vietnamese. Then, later on in the '56 period when we tried to get Aid Mission support for
4 Civic Action and helping to equip and fund these civilian teams, there was a lot of
5 resistance to that which is just mainly bureaucratic because these teams were organized
6 into different departments: Agriculture, Public Safety, and so forth. And they tell you not
7 to work with each other and if you had a Civic Action team which was doing something
8 in Public Works or something in Agriculture, the notion that they could do this rather
9 than agricultural specialists or whatever, just created some resistance in the aid structure.
10 Then they didn't have a Community Development Department in the Aid Mission, which
11 was a fitted sort of idea of Civic Action. So, they were very unenthusiastic about lending
12 any support to that kind of activity. Also, there was some resistance to Lansdale and the
13 whole idea that the CIA might become involved in development works and surely there
14 was a sinister purpose behind it. That was also part of the attitude, but it wasn't so
15 evident in the early days. It became more evident after the Diem Government, Diem had
16 been elected, the government had been set up, and then had an official government with
17 different departments to work with and the 56th period. Some of the problems of the
18 bureaucracy became apparent because the feeling was all of the sudden, we were dealing
19 with a normal country. So, let's set everything up in the traditional way to help with a
20 normal country when it wasn't a normal country at all.

21 KC: I think you make a great point of that in your book. It's a blessing, we've got
22 a constitute assembly, we've got a constitution, an elected president. Now this is great,
23 we have all the blessings, we having something we can work with, but the problem there
24 of course is as you say, the encroaching bureaucrazation of all of this as far as the
25 Americans are concerned. It kind of seems to me stymie creativity as well as furthering
26 this goal of supporting this brand-new fledgling government, this brand-new country.

27 RP: Well, it was also the impression as well of looking at how Diem consolidated
28 control. We don't have to worry about South Vietnam anymore, we can now take the
29 Army out of any kind of provincial pacification role and create it into a regular army to
30 oppose invasion across the parallel. It's just a normal government. And beside that it was
31 just movement within the Eisenhower Government to start cutting aid, that we were

1 spending too much on aid brought anyway. So, some decent programs of land reform, but
2 we wouldn't finance any of it, we wouldn't help them out with the financing of it. So, it
3 became a scheme that became dependent on the folks taking over the land paying off
4 loans and so forth as well. And it didn't receive the emphasis that it should have received
5 had we been much more involved in it and actually helped with some funding. So, we
6 started limiting our own effectiveness. Just assuming that now it's normal government,
7 normal country, we don't have to worry about this one anymore.

8 KC: And it would also seem to me that this would encourage someone to continue
9 consolidate his hold, pardon the exaggeration if you will, on his brother.

10 RP: Well, the problem there was that the station's main contact was Nhu. And
11 they created what amounted to a central intelligence agency as Nhu's personal fiefdom so
12 then the intelligence agency, which extensively set up to guard against communist
13 subversion spends a hell of a lot of his time following around potential democratic
14 political enemy. And we wind up with a. policy that actually supports not just the agency,
15 but the agency is in support of the creation and funding of the Can Lao. This became a
16 huge political problem which Lansdale fought and lost on.

17 KC: And you begin to see the influence. Lansdale's influence primarily begins to
18 wane as the Americans say, "we've got this government set up and we're going to treat it
19 like a regular government, we don't have to listen to this maverick CIA guy anymore. We
20 can allow—"

21 RP: And who needs this guy that we can't control having all this influence.

22 KC: That is something that a bureaucracy absolutely—

23 RP: Now while he had done his job, look at what he did. Just give him the
24 national security medal and move on.

25 KC: Well, let's go ahead and stop there for today Rufus.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [5] of [14]
November 16, 2020

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Philips. Today is 16 November 2020, I am in Lubbock Texas and Mr. Philips is joining
3 me from telephone again from his home in Virginia. Rufus before we bring you back to
4 the United States briefly working in Washington. One thing I wanted to ask you about
5 was the President's brother and this political party, kind of surreptitious behind the scenes
6 kind of things. The Can Lao Party, can you tell me what this was? You briefly mentioned
7 it the last time we spoke but take me through the formation of this thing as well as news
8 influence and the influence that it had on politics in Saigon. I think this is fascinating
9 stuff.

10 Rufus Philips: Yeah, it was a party that was formed initially while Diem and Nhu
11 were both in exile. Diem was in the United States, and I think had little active
12 involvement in the organization of the party, but Nhu did. And he enlisted a number of
13 supporters and people principally from Central Vietnam in the organization of this party.
14 And it was like lots of other Vietnamese parties, it was splinter kind of group and it's
15 purpose was really to try and promote Diem into coming back to Vietnam in an important
16 role. So, Nhu was in contact with Bao Dai and with a number of people in Vietnam. The
17 party was sort of like other Vietnamese political parties at the time, being opposed to the
18 French still running things was sort of submerged. Not sort of, it was a sacred kind of
19 party. So, when Diem returned Nhu came back with him. There was a brother who was
20 installed and came from Central Vietnam who had stayed behind, one was particularly
21 politically active and what they did was start doing outreach to other political groups to
22 try to get support of Diem. Like a lot of underground parties, it was hard to emerge I
23 think into what you would call normal political activity as we characterize it in the United
24 States because people were subject to French arrest for a long time. So, when they came
25 back, Nhu used the contacts of this party to try to recruit people throughout the south to
26 be members of it. And then gradually as Diem emerged and was elected president, Nhu
27 used the political party to solicit support, solicit votes, became active in the referendum
28 against Bao Dai. Thereafter, he used it as a device to exert control over the Civil Service
29 and the Army itself in terms of ensuring personal loyalty to Diem. And that's where I

1 think it became very harmful because it was not operating out in the open as a normal
2 political party was, it was sort of a secret party in which people were initiated into it and
3 had a whole ceremony where they swore personal allegiance to Diem and so forth. This
4 in turn created not only dissension with other existing political parties, but dissension
5 within the civil structure and government particularly in the Army because there were a
6 number of officers who felt they owed loyalty to the whole idea of South Vietnam, but
7 not in completely personal terms to Diem himself. So, that became a divisive factor, the
8 other problem that emerged was the fact that in the initial stages the Agency was
9 supporting Can Lao activities in terms of organization so forth and so on. And that got
10 mixed up with funding for the creation of a national intelligence service which was also
11 created in the presidency and under the news control. So, the combination of these two
12 things became a very divisive element and Lansdale picked up on this early on and
13 opposed it. But it wasn't just the agency, it became official US policy to find the Can Lao
14 to be acceptable. So, we continued to funnel some support, but then as it became more
15 and more divisive and emerged as something of a problem, the agency cut out any
16 funding for it. Nhu then arranged funding by giving commercial licenses to various
17 people to operate sort of a monopoly system; there was a shipping system, there was a
18 monopoly on the production and marketing of charcoal coming out of the (inaudible) area
19 in South Vietnam and then there was a monopoly given to a guy who married Diem's
20 niece who was from Central Vietnam. It was a cinema monopoly and then a fishing,
21 shrimp monopoly down in the Vung Tau area. That was basically a source of some
22 corruption, worse than that it gave the appearance of corruption even when corruption
23 didn't exist. So, it became a real problem and I learned about it from Lansdale who
24 before I agreed to come back he told this was going to be a problem and I should be
25 aware of it in making my decision to come back to Vietnam as a civilian working for the
26 agency in '56. One of the things that happened, Lansdale tried to prevent it becoming a
27 real force and at one point I learned from the acting Secretary of Defense who had
28 become a close personal friend that promotions were being affected by this. We got
29 information to Gen Williams who was head of MAAG and he went to Diem about it. We
30 got it stopped temporarily, but it was the kind of thing that was bound to be a continuing
31 problem.

1 KC: Especially given the political culture there, I guess.

2 RP: Yeah.

3 KC: There are just so many things that this had it's tentacles in and in different
4 ways. You have the effort to create this nationalist following of strengthen this nationalist
5 following and of course the Americans I think in DC, Diem was their guy. So, this party
6 promoting Diem would be seen from Washington's eyes as this is what we need to do
7 now as he's our guy. But then you have the subversion of the army, subversion of the
8 system—

9 RP: That was exactly the psychology. There was also this feeling of look how
10 Diem prevailed, so we don't have to worry about South Vietnam much anymore.
11 Everything is resolved. Yeah, that went along with it.

12 KC: So many other problems that touch so many other different aspects of
13 political life there. even the way things developed, I think it's just a really interesting
14 little nugget of information that is tremendously important to understanding the
15 development of this of the mid to late 50s.

16 RP: Yeah and here was Lansdale trying to persuade Diem to rise above the
17 partisan politics because he was the first president in effect of South Vietnam, and he lost
18 that argument. He argued and came back and really had a step to with Douglas and
19 Foster-Douglas about it and lost the argument. Which I found out later, he didn't tell me
20 all that background, he just told me what the problem was and he understood that one of
21 the problems that the South Vietnamese were facing was the fact that they never had an
22 open political system. So, you had all these other parties that had been equally
23 underground and were emerging and so disfavoring this kind of approach to Vietnamese
24 politics was bound to support something that would undermine the government
25 eventually politically. And that was the second and the second was quite accurate. The
26 other thing that I wanted to talk to you about was the decision that was not made by
27 MAAG, but here in Washington by DoD that the main problem facing the future of
28 Vietnam and its security was an outright invasion across the 17th parallel by the North
29 Vietnamese Army which was visibly reconstituting itself and getting arms from the
30 Soviet Union. That seemed like the logical whereas Lansdale was arguing that the
31 problem was not that. Yeah, that was a possibility, and also the theory was that we must

1 avoid any future intervention by US forces, so therefore we should train up the
2 Vietnamese forces or the regular army that can oppose this. And we are going to turn
3 over internal security to national guard that should be organized, trained, et cetera.
4 However, that mission was given in the support over to USAID and USAID decided what
5 they needed was advisors who understood police systems in the United States. It was
6 obvious what was needed was not a standard police operation, but a kind of constabulary
7 operation that was closely glued to the population and they had some characteristics of
8 the Philippine constabulary after Magsaysay had reorganized it. Of course, Lansdale was
9 trying to suggest that was a model he followed. And eventually on the Vietnamese side
10 there was a dissatisfaction with the fact that aid really wasn't equipped to do this, police
11 advisors sent out didn't know what they were doing and so there was dissatisfaction with
12 the pace of disorganization of putting the Civil Guard on its feet. A fight broke out which
13 Williams and Diem got involved trying to take over that program and he was opposed by
14 the American Ambassador and of course by USAID itself. So, it remained a USAID
15 project that was very, very poorly handled, so there was no valid replacement at the
16 province level for a security force. That then left a lot of room for the Viet Minh to
17 reorganize and of course they left behind arms caches and so on and so forth. So, that
18 became I think really a part of the problem.

19 KC: And you had so much luck working with the Vietnamese Army, promoting
20 these kinds of things, promoting internal security in addition to buildings and bridges and
21 these internal sorts of things.

22 RP: Yeah, they were organized as a territorial force. And once they were removed
23 as a territorial force and reorganized into corps and divisions with a model being the US
24 Army. There was a security vacuum left behind.

25 KC: Yeah, the Army had all kinds of advantages that a civilian effort would not
26 have in terms of logistics and money and the ability—

27 RP: Not only that in terms of the experience and outlook and policy.

28 KC: And then to realize there was no civilian replacement for that immediately.
29 That is going to have to be trained up, its going to have to be education, you're going to
30 have to understand before you can get them out there. Kind of in the lurch in that sense.

1 RP: And you could have organized a civilian effort. And Lansdale argued to use
2 the Philippine constabulary as a model and let's set in training in the Philippines and get
3 some Filipino advisors over here. And set it up on a basis that focused on what the
4 problems are going to be rather than that of a conventional police force and so the other
5 thing that happened was the province chiefs started using without a lot of guidance or
6 supervision coming down, a lot of them started using these folks to sweep their yards and
7 all kinds of local tasks. There became a very stationary force for protecting roads and
8 bridges and stuck in outposts. There was no outreach to the civilian population.

9 KC: Which, again, leaves a group of people that are far away in a number of ways
10 from Saigon still having no link to Saigon. There's no national presence there.

11 RP: Well, in order to establish a link, an organization called Civic Action was
12 created and run out of the presidency by a former Viet Minh brigadier who had defected
13 from the Viet Minh because he was in the North and they tried to recruit him into the
14 Communist Party and he resisted that. This was while the war with the French was still
15 going on and managed to escape south with his wife and two children. He somehow
16 avoided both the Viet Minh and the French and resettled him. He was from the South
17 originally and had been one of the early resistance leaders against the French and he
18 settled on a farm owned by his wife. When Diem came to power he came out from there
19 and became a supporter and believer in Diem because of his nationalism and the fact that
20 he was resisting the French. One of the unique things was he didn't go directly to talk
21 Diem or his brother, he first came to Lansdale. How he knew about Lansdale I don't
22 know. It was kind of—he could see that the Americans had replaced the French and were
23 supporters. But somehow word got to him that if you wanted to talk to Diem one of the
24 ways to get to Diem was through Lansdale. Now just think about that for a minute and
25 that's one of the qualities of Lansdale that people never understood. His use as a go
26 between by people that wanted to support Diem and the administration, but then they
27 have the personal contacts themselves and thought they could go talk to him and give
28 them some advice and some help. Which Lansdale did, he introduced him to Diem, and it
29 took off from there and they set up a commissariat of Civic Action and started training
30 teams of civilians to go out into the countryside and I became very much involved in that
31 because the agency at Lansdale's persuasion provided some seed money. Beside what the

1 South Vietnamese government were really strapped for funds to set up a training center
2 and start recruiting and training people in teams to go work in the villages. That became a
3 whole other effort that needed eventually USAID support. That we did not get. I think
4 part of it was kind of agency rivalry and it kind of bled over in certain quarters that in
5 USAID they didn't want to be involved in anything that smacked at a possible
6 intelligence operation. This wasn't an intelligence operation at all. But there was a lot of
7 suspicion about that. So, reluctantly USAID signed off on providing some assistance, but
8 no funding and it was all material assistance. By material I am meaning stuff like picks
9 and shovels and scissors for cutting cloth and sewing machines and all stuff like this. To
10 cap this story in a way when I went to Laos in early '58 I stopped off in Vietnam and
11 Diem found out I was there and called me in, but I also went in to talk to my old friend
12 who was the head of Civic Action. He said to me, "well I just got a magnificent support
13 from USAID" and I said, "Oh, you did. Wonderful. What is it?" He said, "25,000
14 scissors." (Laughing) Yeah. Anyway, the whole shift was towards a very condense
15 approach, while we don't need anybody like Lansdale around, we need to start treating
16 this like a normal nation when it wasn't a normal nation.

17 KC: Right. When that is the easiest thing to get our head wrapped around and
18 bureaucracies are more satisfied, they are more comfortable when we have things in
19 place. What we think we have in place because then we understand it because it's such a
20 fluid situation, such a different situation in Vietnam as it was in other places. This is not
21 Western Europe, obviously.

22 RP: Well, even some developing countries, a lot of developing countries didn't
23 have a lot of subversive caches with arms at the ready and trail from '59 on through
24 which you could infiltrate people all the way into the South.

25 KC: That's a good point.

26 RP: You can understand what the problem was and what the South Vietnamese
27 themselves were up against. Also, their own limitations in terms of operating a viable
28 political system because of their underground and background almost exclusively
29 underground politics.

30 KC: And that is another great point to mention there. throughout all of this, what's
31 going on in the military, what's going out on in the villages, what's going on in Saigon.

1 And the effort of the constitute assembly where you have a constitution, of differing
2 views of the constitution. With Diem's more centralized kind of approach, you are trying
3 to create a true democratic set of elections fort a representative legislature, on top of all
4 the rest of this. So, it is an incredibly fluid situation with very, very important things
5 being decided.

6 RP: The one very important effort was Lansdale's effort to influence the writing
7 of the constitution. And he brought over a constitutional expert from the Philippines that
8 was quite influential in setting up and proposing what you would call a liberal-democratic
9 constitution. And then there developed a fight over how do you make or create a
10 relatively independent judiciary and Lansdale was trying to get that and trying to sell the
11 idea to Diem, but he was getting no support from the American side on that particular
12 thing. And it was going to be difficult in any case for the Vietnamese to begin operating
13 in an open political system and no matter who was in the presidency it would not have
14 been easy. But I think we played to Diem worse instincts and certainly to his brother's
15 instincts to dominate the situation politically by using this sacred control apparatus and
16 using the intelligence agency more to spy on political opponents than on the active Viet
17 Cong. And then there were others that hurt the overall effort which is this anti-communist
18 denunciation thing. Which by the way was supported.

19 KC: Well, you mention—

20 RP: And also, we supported the Vietnamese secret police, that didn't operate on
21 any restraints, so the fact that some things apart of the population had supported the Viet
22 Minh were now nationalists. A lot of them got labeled as being communist or pro-
23 communist and were alienated. So, you could argue that maybe trying to get a reasonably
24 democratic responsive administration going in South Vietnam. You could argue that
25 maybe that is an impossible task, but we certainly didn't try hard enough to influence the
26 outcome there. It was our feeling, or at least my feeling from what I saw that we could
27 have done a much better job of that. Diem was an interesting guy, the natural tendency I
28 think of anybody who would have been president would have been to centralize control
29 over what was going on because you had almost a nonexistent civil service structure
30 beneath you and you had the Army, which if they became frustrated, they could become
31 the source of a military coup. So, the emphasis was on how you control all that instead of

1 how do you win the loyalty of enough votes across a diverse spectrum of religious axis
2 and quasi-political party to have a consensus of support for what you are trying to do. I
3 thought, just based on my personal contact with Diem that there was always some
4 potential so long as you knew what you were talking about, and you could tell him things
5 that he didn't know about what was going on; and he would listen. So, this is all
6 guessing. When you think about this across a broad range of countries, you realize that
7 this is kind of a risky proposition, but surely we could be a little bit more sensitive. We
8 cannot always be Lansdale, but we can feel people that are a little more understanding of
9 what the problem is, and we can figure out ways to support the right ways instead of the
10 wrong instincts.

11 KC: Like you said, playing to the wrong instincts, or the worst of the instincts. I
12 would guess from Washington's perspective an independent judiciary would perhaps
13 hamstring or strongman; we need a guy in charge, only when that guy has plenty of
14 power is he going to be able to settle these things with the different sects of the army with
15 all these different things he's moving pieces.

16 RP: That remained kind of after Diem was overthrown and then I can go into this
17 later, but it was the same attitude, "let's get a strong man in there who can just tell people
18 what to do." And that's the solution.

19 KC: And build a government that supports that.

20 RP: Yeah. But we can't even do that in the United States (laughing).

21 KC: Well, let me ask you this Rufus—

22 RP: You get the wrong guys telling the people the wrong thing to do (both
23 laughing)—

24 KC: Yeah, straighten up your own house first.

25 RP: Yeah.

26 KC: What do you think about this. I mean this has got to be an incredibly vital
27 time, an exciting, thrilling time for you. What do you feel about your career at this point?
28 In 1955, 1956, how do you like working with the agency and these types of things? What
29 does Rufus Philips want to do with this situation?

30 RP: I was doing that with Lansdale and became so involved in this whole Civic
31 Action thing that when I came back to Washington in the fall of 1955, he actually

1 convened a meeting of the Operations Coordinating Board. If you remember that that was
2 a coordinating mechanism underneath the NSC which directly involved the people who
3 were in active roles in the Defense Department and State Department and USAID and the
4 agency and trying to flesh out policy differences before going to the NSC with proposed
5 decisions. So, he arranged for me to give a briefing on Civic Action and all of a sudden I
6 became the Civic Action expert which is kind of funny. That then evolved in my decision
7 to go back was really influenced by my understanding of what the regional problem was.
8 And I had been sent up to Laos just to take a look at what was going on up there and then
9 I was asked if I would consider going up to Laos as a civilian to start Civic Action up
10 there. So, I accepted that challenge, I didn't think about career, I wasn't thinking about
11 any career at all, I just liked it and went in and thought, "this is the next challenge." And
12 the agency felt that the situation was pretty stable in South Vietnam, but Laos was under
13 lot of pressure, (inaudible) had come in as the head of the government and he achieved
14 this agreement with the Pathet Lao that he was going to admit them into government,
15 there were going to be elections. The government had no reach out in the countryside and
16 if the elections were going to favor pro-government candidates versus the Pathet Lao,
17 which was basically communists, but they call themselves nationalist party was really
18 being run out of Hanoi. If they were not going to win these elections, if the government
19 was going to win the elections we had to do something to demonstrate that the
20 government cared about all the population living out in the villages. So, that was the
21 reason why I went up to Laos. Frank Wiznor came out to Saigon and asked me personally
22 to undertake this mission. So, I guess I had become imbued with some kind of missionary
23 spirit and so excited by what had gone on in the Philippines and what I had thought were
24 the prospects for South Vietnam to follow. That it would keep the Communists from
25 taking over the rest of Southeast Asia, it seemed like a worldly mission, and it certainly
26 was the pinpoint of their political and military advance was going obviously come
27 through Laos. So, then Laos kind of became the key problem, the key objective, at least
28 on the agency's side.

29 KC: How did Laos differ from your efforts in Vietnam? What sort of plusses and
30 minuses did you have working for you and against you in Laos compared to South
31 Vietnam?

1 RP: Well, South Vietnamese were a lot better organized. They were a different
2 kind of people in terms of self-generated activity, a degree of sophistication in terms of
3 know-how, how to do things. Laos was a country that was composed of villages and the
4 villages were largely self-sufficient and then you had about sixteen different mountain
5 tribal groups living mainly up in the mountains in a pretty isolated way. There was a
6 government in Laos itself consisted of a few people who were then in their earlier
7 insistence of the French was predominated by people who had been educated at France,
8 come back to Laos. You didn't have any civil servants, you had the Lao Army, but the
9 Lao Army wasn't all that well trained. The idea was to start with the Army for form Civic
10 Action teams in Laos. Then that didn't work out exactly and we had to form civilian team
11 that required a lot of recruitment and the people we were recruiting were not as well
12 educated as those in South Vietnam. Laos had a lot of wonderful people, but a lot more
13 relaxed than others. There was a guy named Hank Mello of the USIF who directed the
14 Public Affairs office. And he and his wife became very close to the Lao, they invited Lao
15 into their house. He had a great phrase to characterize how things moved in Laos. And he
16 said, "the Lao can always out slow you." (Laughter) So, it was very much a different
17 culture.

18 KC: Well, the Pathet Lao's efforts to bring in some of the Pathet Lao into the
19 National Army. Would that have negated some of the work you were trying to do as
20 well?

21 RP: No, that didn't become a problem because they really didn't want it. An effort
22 was made, campus was established, but they deliberately kept to themselves. And they
23 were really under covert instructions from the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese
24 attempt was to use this force to undermine any legitimate government in Laos. To carry
25 out a subversive campaign in the villages in which they would insert, not the North
26 Vietnamese, but the Pathet Lao were bringing in so-called advisors with promises that
27 they were going to help the village, and then deliberately set out to destroy the village
28 structure from within. They were very good at doing it. So, you had this kind of activity
29 going on at the village level and the feeling was, "can we get the national government
30 involved to help combat that." And when I went up to Laos just for exploratory visits
31 before I came home in 1955 I talked to the Lao Army Chief of Staff, and he already had

1 the Civic Action idea. He wanted to send army teams into the village, but that became—
2 once I got there I found that there were a lot of problems in trying to get anything done
3 inside of the Lao Government.

4 KC: And why is that Rufus?

5 RP: That is a long story. Maybe we will reserve that for another time.

6 KC: Sure, sure. Well, I'll tell you what, that probably takes us to a pretty good
7 time to stop today. And a place to pick up next time working in Laos and with the Lao
8 government and the monarchy et cetera.

9 RP: Yeah.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [6] of [14]
November 19, 2020

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today is 19 November 2020 I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 kind enough to join me by telephone from Arlington, Virginia. Rufus let's talk about, or
4 have you talk about Laos today. Your time there '57-'59, I know that in your memoir you
5 mention it, but it's kind of a quick shift that you give. You said the press wanted you to
6 condense that part overall. So, please feel free, the things that are in your memoir, the
7 things that are not in your memoir, the things that you had to leave out; tell me about
8 your time there in Laos in '57.

9 Rufus Philips: Alright. Well, Frank Wisner came out to Saigon in '56 and he had
10 known from Lansdale—I don't have to say who Frank Wisner is, do I?

11 KC: You can if you want to. But most people probably will.

12 RP: Anyway, he said that because of my involvement in Civic Action in Vietnam,
13 I was trying to decide what to do. My father wanted me to come into business with him, I
14 was mustering out of the military, and I decided to—I am sorry. I am out of sequence. I
15 had mustered out of the military in '55, I came back as a civilian. I was entering because
16 Lansdale was leaving South Vietnam, there was nothing for me to do there. the question
17 in my mind was well do I continue with the agency as a case officer. And Wisner came
18 out and said, "would you be willing to consider going up to Laos and starting Civic
19 Action up there because the Lao Army Chief of Staff has expressed an interest in getting
20 his soldiers out working with the people. And could you just go up and explore it?" So, I
21 went up to talk to the station chief and I actually met the Lao Chief of Staff, and we had a
22 really nice conversation. I met him up at his house and it was on a weekend I think, so he
23 was not in uniform and the typical Lao kind of shirt sitting up on his porch in the typical
24 Lao house that's on stilts. So, we sat there and talked in French, and he explained to me
25 what he saw the problem was that the government wasn't close enough to the population.
26 They weren't really helping them, while in the meantime the Pathet Lao were subverting
27 villages and convincing them to oppose the government. The war has stopped, there was
28 also the problem of the Prime Minister coming in who had negotiated this agreement that
29 the Pathet Lao were going to incorporate their forces in the Army and then there were

1 going to be elections. There was this big vacuum in the countryside between the
2 government and they had provinces and province chiefs and nothing underneath the
3 province chief and any real connection. There was certainly no medical assistance, no
4 support. So, I was pretty much intrigued about that, so I agreed to go out. And I did in
5 February of '57, it took a little time to process me as a civilian—wait a minute I was
6 already a civilian. Sorry. For some reason it took some time to process me, so I didn't get
7 there until February. And I started working with a fellow named Oudone Sananikone who
8 was a colonel in the Lao Army, the Sananikone Family of which he which a nephew of
9 the Sananikone who became prime minister was a very prominent family. He had been
10 educated a little bit in France and was a very nice, bright guy. I started helping him and
11 the agency put some seed money into it just to get it organized. The original idea was the
12 Army itself, which was not doing anything at this point, the teams would be formed out
13 of the Army using sergeants to head up the teams and then using military personnel to go
14 and work in the villages and begin working with the villages on village improvements.
15 To establish some kind of real connection.

16 KC: Sure, which is something you did in Vietnam to some effect.

17 RP: Yeah, that's what I was involved in Vietnam. So, I was put undercover, very
18 light cover, in the Aid Mission. And it created sort of a department of rural development.
19 So, I started working and had difficulties with the USOM people because they were very
20 suspicious about anybody who was working for the agency. So, it took some time to
21 overcome that. But the biggest problem was the prime minister who didn't want the
22 Army doing this, so the way that it came out was we had to go and recruit civilians. Well,
23 there wasn't a very large base of educated civilians and so, that got off to a pretty slow
24 start. It began gradually and the first real challenge was there a final agreement with the
25 Pathet Lao and these elections. They were set for 1957, so the Civic Action teams we
26 tried to accelerate and get them out working in the villages. The NFC back here came up
27 with a combined program called Operation Booster Shot and Operation Booster Shot was
28 designed to provide materials such as cemented and sheet roofing and medical supplies
29 and stuff to the Lao Villages. So, I suddenly found myself in charge of this operation
30 working for the ambassador who was a new ambassador named Harvey Smith. He was a
31 piece of work. He was—I'll give you an example. We had this plan since the Lao had

1 few rows we were going to air drop a lot of these supplies into the village. And the idea
2 was to come and use Air Force planes but take off the markings. So, it could be said that
3 it wasn't a US Air Force coming in and doing this on behalf of the Lao Government,. In
4 other words, it was supposed to be the Lao Government contracting for the civilian cargo
5 planes to fly these supplies. So, Smith couldn't understand this at all, he opposed
6 removing the indicators on the planes that these were official US planes because he
7 wanted us to get the credit. And I tried to explain to him that we were trying to give the
8 Lao Government the credit.

9 KC: We don't want the credit.

10 RP: We don't want the credit. Well, that consumed several weeks, and I don't
11 think he ever understood it. Really! I mean, that's how dumb he was. Well, the other
12 thing was he came in and he was very influenced by the French. The station chief by that
13 time had changed to a guy named Henry Eicher and a huge argument started between
14 Eicher and the ambassador over the kinds of things Lao Government should, be doing.
15 Henry was quite influential with the Prime Minister who was the uncle of Sananikone
16 who I was working with. There wasn't a lot of dissents inside of the government
17 between the younger Lao in some of the ministries and the Army on one side and these
18 older politicians on the other side who were just feckless for the most part. The whole
19 family ties had become prominent because they were from leading families, but they
20 really couldn't care less about doing much of anything. And the French had staffed the
21 whole Civil Service underneath them. So, the French were removed from that you pretty
22 much had a government vacuum at the top. The Lao came up with the idea of forming
23 some kind of apolitical force here, so we got behind that, it was called the Committee for
24 the Defense of the National Interests. We were helping to fund it, so we got off the seat
25 and had a big meeting. I was involved in this big side (laughing); I am trying to provide a
26 counterweight to energize the government to oppose what the Pathet Lao were up to. So,
27 there were simultaneous, and Henry was supporting the Sinai and then Horace Smith was
28 opposing it., so it had this big split going on in the government. Anyway, Operation
29 Booster Shot, we really did deliver the goods out to the Lao villages and the problem was
30 that the fact that the government was contacted to it, it never got connected to the
31 political candidates themselves because there was so much rivalry among those potential

1 candidates and people who were already in the ministry. And they couldn't come up
2 with—the pro-government forces candidates per jurisdiction. So, they were running two
3 or three candidates and the Pathet Lao were only running one.

4 KC: Right. Which makes it more susceptible to the communist influence there.

5 RP: Well of course. If you go to the split to vote between two pro-governments
6 and one Pathet Lao candidate, the Pathet Lao has the advantage in most sentences. It was
7 an adventure and you had to have a sense of humor (laughter). One of the candidates
8 actually ran against the Pathet Lao leader who was related was a cousin of Savata Putin.
9 So, he ran in a province which is north of Vientiane which is the capital. And there was
10 one, another uncle of my friend Oudone ran as the sole pro-government candidate and he
11 lost to Sounthone, the communist candidate. And so, he was really upset afterwards, so
12 he went up to a Lao village, one of the large villages and he had all the village people
13 assemble and he said, "I did all this stuff, look over there I got that roofed, and this and
14 this and you didn't vote for me." And one somebody out in the crowd said, "well, you
15 didn't ask us to vote for you." (Laughter)

16 KC: That's a good example of making sure your program is very clear to the
17 people you're trying to appeal to.

18 RP: By the way, candidates make that kind of mistake even.

19 KC: (Inaudible)

20 RP: Anyway, that was a little bit of how it went, so of course the Pathet Lao
21 elected a number of folks. It was a supplemental election, so they got an additional fifteen
22 seats in the National Assembly which wasn't enough to tip the National Assembly, but
23 still it was a considerable advance. And the whole seating organization got sparked by
24 that among the younger Lao and the Lao Army leadership. Who said, "this is a
25 completely incompetent government, and we have to do something." And so, they got off
26 to a pretty good start, but then there was this complete split on the American side
27 between what we were trying to do with the Sinai with village development and what
28 Horace Smith, the ambassador, was trying to do. And it got so bad that at one point there
29 was some rumor of a coup by the Army, and they didn't really intend to have a coup, but
30 they were trying to put pressure onto the then prime minister to sort of be more
31 accommodating and more supportive of their effort. And at that point I came back to

1 Washington, and I attended my first NFC meeting. I was asked by the head of the far east
2 agency to accompany him and Alan to a meeting and the meeting was held—for some
3 reason I think Foster may have already been ill, I am not sure. But his deputy was
4 Christian Herder who presided off the meeting we had, the Chamber of the Joint Chiefs
5 who at that time was—I'll think of it in a minute. Famous destroyer commander, Burke,
6 and I forgot who else was attending it. It was not a big meeting. So, Dollace explained in
7 a very abstract way what the situation was, and the question was sort of do we support
8 this pressure effort by the Army short of a coup or do we not. And it really got down to a
9 discussion what they are eating for breakfast out there; I mean it really was. So, I was the
10 only person who knew firsthand any of that, so I spoke up. (Laughing) And Dollace
11 started frowning and they started asking me questions, “well tell me who this is and what
12 that is and what are the Sinai.” So, I was all pro what we were trying to do, and I was
13 giving them information, obviously I had a certain point of view. But I was trying to tell
14 them what I saw and my reaction. Well, that kind of upset the meeting and nobody could
15 come to any kind of decision and Dollace really frowned at me, and he went back to his
16 own separate car and I went back with someone else. And he looked at me, “you know
17 Dollace is really mad at you.” And I said, “Why?” and he said, “Well, we’re not
18 supposed to talk about policy at these meetings, we just deliver intelligence.” And I said,
19 “I am just trying to give them an idea of what things were like in Laos.”

20 KC: Because somebody clearly—

21 RP: —Because I can relate to it. And he looked at me and said, “Well, don’t say
22 anything to Dollace if he calls you in, but I am proud of you.” So, that was my first NFC
23 encounter. Anyway, so, when Kennedy—I kept going with Civic Action and I eventually
24 got some real support within USAID. Well, for a crazy reason I don’t know whether to
25 relate all these stories or not.

26 KC: Well, that’s up to you Rufus, I am glad to hear them and happy to have them
27 on the record.

28 RP: Well, there is one other. The program officer and the deputy program officer
29 in the mission were initially very suspicious of what the hell I was up to. But I sort of
30 made friends with them and I got a call—I have an office out ion the USOM town, but I
31 am also working sort of out of my house. And I get a call on the phone from one of the

1 deputy programs officers, and he said if I can come down, there's something he needs my
2 help with. So, I go down and talk to him and it seems that he has become very fond of
3 this Chinese girl that is working in this nightclub who came to Laos on contract and the
4 nightclub is being run by some Vietnamese. They are abusing her and not living up to the
5 contact according to him that's what she told him. And so, he said, "she wants to leave,
6 and I can help her, can you just use your jeep and drive me back and I'll go get her with
7 her suitcase and take her out here to the compound and then I'll get her taken care of. She
8 can leave the country and go back to Hong Kong" And I naively said sure, I thought this
9 was all up and up. So, we drive by the nightclub, this us during the day and he goes in
10 and get this girl. They come out, they jump in the jeep and there is this group of
11 Vietnamese that come out yelling and screaming. So, I just floored the car and take them
12 out to the compound wit this girl. Well, it turns out there was a flummox with the
13 government and et cetera, et cetera, and nothing much came of it. Both these guys were
14 berated because they were both in on this thing and of course they explained it that I
15 didn't know anything about it I was just trying to help them out. But as a result, they
16 became my greatest supporters. And all I had to do was this one instance.

17 KC: It is personal ties that sometimes pay off the best.

18 RP: Yeah. So, we got Civic Action going and I think it was actually doing some
19 good. It had quite a psychological result with the Laos Government itself is that before
20 that American assistance had really been paralyzed. First of all, there was an attitude
21 within the Aid Mission that the Lao were not capable of anything therefore why should
22 we be giving them the assistance when they wouldn't know how to use it. And it was well
23 at the point where one of the prominent aid people, not the guys I befriended, who said
24 all these people just came down out of the trees. I mean that was the attitude. And there
25 was even an incident where there was an appeal, a civilian advisory mission set up there
26 and a lot of them had somewhat similar ideas so working with the Lao Government and
27 they didn't have much of charter to the funding assistance to the Lao Government. But
28 we were trying to conform to the Geneva Agreement and so not to get into actually
29 training the army. We did bring some Special Forces out and begin some training, but
30 that was opposed by the French. The French were still there, they had amnesty, an Aid
31 Mission of their own. So, we were working in a difficulty area and the Souvanna Phouma

1 had a French assistance, he was the prime minister who helped him in his office and sort
2 of tried to obstruct what the Americans were trying to do. So, it was not an easy terrain to
3 work in. the Lao were wonderful people and very cooperative, but there was just an
4 inconsistency on the American side division of opinion, and then you had the French who
5 were just kind of sticking the stick in the wheels whenever they could. And it was a
6 frustrating situation. Then when I stayed there until '59, and I left just before the North
7 Vietnamese using the Pathet Lao invaded part of Laos and began setting up the Ho Chi
8 Minh trail. They just took over a section of Laos and I they were in the process of doing
9 it. And I came back, and we had that kind of intelligence, but you could never get the
10 international commission that was composed of the Indians and Pols and one other
11 country, I think the British because the Pols were supporting—the Indians were
12 supporting the Pols who were supporting the Indians who were taking the communist
13 side. We could not get any kind of definitive opinion of what the Pathet Lao and the
14 North Vietnamese were up to. And there was really evidence on the ground that they
15 were real north Vietnamese soldier invading Laos. So, at that point I was pretty frustrated
16 by the problem trying to work effectively in the agency. I liked Henry Eicher, but there
17 was no Lansdale to work for and I decided to leave the agency and get out. Then I joined
18 my father in private business and that ended my time with the agency. And it was another
19 thing that sort of turned me off and that was kind of an attitude of some of the so-called
20 smarter guys that we were there to use people. That wasn't my approach or Lansdale's
21 approach at all. In other word—the other thing that happened was the leader of the Far
22 East Chain brought in a guy who had been in Europe, eastern Europe and he started
23 evaluating operations and people throughout Southeast Asia on a basis of how many
24 agents have you recruited. Well, I had been in a situation where I hadn't recruited any. I
25 recruited them to work for their own government, that was Lansdale's approach, I had no
26 idea how to recruit this agent and he has no real control over. It was part of the approach
27 that I knew wasn't going to work. Yeah, you can buy people and get people to work for
28 you and they can give you information, but that made them largely useless in being a
29 positive political force in their own country.

30 KCL That's interesting, this approach would have been tried and true in Europe,
31 and especially in Eastern Europe with the Cold War.

1 RP: Yeah, this is basically a kind of cynical approach—

2 KC: Yeah, a cynical approach that is very different from the situation you are
3 dealing with there in Laos.

4 RP: Yeah. And also, you know, it's kind of an attitude. In Europe your
5 supposedly (inaudible) with the much more sophisticated environment and the people
6 you are dealing with are more tricky and more sophisticated. Anyway, you are trying to
7 penetrate a country that is already organized against you. Sometimes you get volunteers,
8 they got some great folks that were recruited in the Soviet Union who volunteered. But
9 they were rare so you tried to buy people where you could just to get information. Which
10 is a different kind of operation I can understand. But that was not what was needed in
11 Laos.

12 KC: It was not applicable there.

13 RP: And in the rest of Southeast Asia. So, I had a big (inaudible) to with a guy
14 about my age, a case officer who was going out to Southeast Asia, I forgot where he was
15 going to be posted. But he was telling me how he was going to outsmart all these folks
16 out there and by God he was going to recruit them and if they didn't do right he would
17 expose them. That was his whole approach, this negative approach. So, that really turned
18 me off. I think it wasn't a decisive thing that got me to leave the agency, but it was
19 certainly part of it. I just didn't see a role for myself just in a pure intelligence operation.
20 So, that's why I left the agency in '59 and joined my father in his engineering business.

21 KC: What about that? Tell me about that part of your story Rufus. What was it
22 like being back in the States in a civilian role, you are working in engineering aircraft.
23 Tell me about this time, it was just for a few years, but how satisfying did you find it?
24 Tell me about your experiences here, the kinds of projects you are working on.

25 RP: Well, this was a consulting engineering firm that my father. He had been in
26 the Army Air Corps, he had people who had been in the Army Engineering Corps who
27 had built airports, so they got into aviation becoming and growing as a tremendous means
28 of transport. there was a great need in the US and outside for new airport or improved
29 airports. So, they could accommodate this tremendous growth in passengers as well as
30 new growth in airplanes. It turned out my father became involved in a bunch of projects
31 in Latin America and also a little but in Spain. He had spoken French, so he acquired

1 some Spanish so when I came in he wanted me to get involved in this foreign work which
2 of course I felt comfortable in doing. I had to absorb what the hell airport planning and
3 design was all about kind of by osmosis because I didn't have an engineering degree. So,
4 he was using me to promote the services and go around and see if we could get contracts.
5 So, I had to learn Spanish and convert from English to Spanish and that turned out to
6 be—I was taking Spanish classes at night at Georgetown. It turned out to be more
7 difficult than I anticipated because every time I would come to a word that I was thinking
8 in English and then converting I would come to a word I didn't know, out popped the
9 French word. And these are not the same. So, I was sort of struggling with this, but
10 making progress. Well, of course the big event of my life was I was in El Salvador, and
11 we had gotten a contract there to study the airport. I had been down there to talk to the
12 Minister of Public Works. A lot of the Salvadorians spoke English and the Minister of
13 Public Works name was Roberto Parker. His grandfather had emigrated to El Salvador as
14 an Englishman and had become very prominent, so it was a very prominent family. But
15 he had gone to Southern Cal, and he played halfback for Southern Cal. So, there were
16 two personalities and we kind of stuck it off right away. We had done this feasibility
17 study on expanding the Ilopango International Airport which was the main airport of El
18 Salvador and the way the airport was running you could expand it, so you had to come up
19 with a runway that was completely cross in another direction. In other words it had right
20 angles. And it had to cross the Pan-American highway and the railway and so it had to
21 have a tunnel under it; it was fairly complicated. But anyway, I went down there, this was
22 after the study had started to visit him just to talk to him. Well, at the same time the inter-
23 American development bank was having its first international meeting down there, that
24 was something that had been sponsored by Eisenhower, but then Kennedy had come in
25 and supported it. Eisenhower had appointed his former Director of the NFC to be the
26 principal person and on the Board of Directors of the newly formed bank. That's where I
27 met my wife. I was seated at the pool at this really beautiful condo hotel that had a pool. I
28 was out at the pool on a Sunday and all of a sudden this very attractive girl in a white
29 bathing suit come walking by and she is followed by this gaggle of Latinos who are
30 speaking a mile a minute and she is just talking to them over her shoulder. And I am
31 looking at her and thought, "gosh I would sure like to meet her. But how the hell am I

1 ever supposed to do that? My Spanish is so poor. I can't possibly communicate."

2 Anyway, that very evening Roberto had invited me to go to a reception that the back was

3 having in the hotel. So, he and I go into the reception room and down at the end is the

4 newly elected president of the bank and there standing beside him is this girl. And so, I

5 said "Roberto do you know who that is?" He said, "Oh yeah" I said, "you've got to

6 introduce me" we were talking in English. And he said, "I've got my eye on her myself."

7 I said, "Come on Roberto, you've got to wonderful wife and two grown children." He

8 was just kidding. Anyway, so he goes and introduces me, and I was expecting to try to be

9 responding to something in Spanish to her this girl is speaking completely colloquial

10 English.

11 KC: I'll be darned.

12 RP: And that started it.

13 KC: And for the record, her name?

14 RP: Her name was Barbara Elenora Hugh. And she originally came from Chile

15 and emigrated to the United States and was invited to assume a ballet career. She went

16 and stayed with her sister who was working for the UN in New York and tried to take

17 ballet lessons, but she had to work selling hats, I forgot the store in New York, in the

18 meantime. And she discovered by this time—let's see that was 1960. She was already 22

19 or 23 and she was competing all these girls who were 16 and she wouldn't take the ballet

20 lessons, so she abandoned that, and she had a friend in Washington who said the State

21 Department was looking for interpreters to work with invited groups from Latin America.

22 There was a big program where we invited people from various countries with groups

23 that specialized groups to come to visit their particular industries and also to get a view of

24 the United States. It was a very successful program, but they needed interpreters to

25 accompany groups from Latin America, so she came down and she had never particular

26 served as an ambassador before, but she took the exam and passed. She was just a

27 natural. And they tested her on simultaneous which is if you are speaking about three

28 words behind the person who is talking into your ear in English, and you are speaking

29 Spanish. She passed that test, so she decided to come down to Washington to do that and

30 she did that. Then the Interamerican Development Bank hired her on a temporary basis

31 and then she became the first employee of the back after they had formally formed, a full-

1 time employee. So, she was there in that form in April, and she had spent part of her
2 youth in New York as a child because her father was a consul general to Cuba but
3 working in New York as a consul general than in Los Angeles and then he went out and
4 started the embassy in Australia, this was right at the end of WWII. So, that was how she
5 was completely fluent in English.

6 KC: And quite worldly by that time was well.

7 RP: Yeah, she had been all over the place. So, we met in February and married in
8 May.

9 KC: Not wasting any time.

10 RP: Yeah. So, my life changed and nine months later after our marriage in May
11 we had our first child. And then the year after that we had our second child and then
12 that's when we bought a house in McLean with my parents help. All of sudden my life
13 changed. It was a wonderful change.

14 CK: Oh, I am sure, I am sure.

15 RP: Well, she unfortunately passed away in February, but she and I were married
16 for 59 years 8 months, and 8 days.

17 KC: That's outstanding. Outstanding.

18 RP: Yeah. So, anyway, that was part of the change in my life, and I started really
19 getting quite fluent in Spanish. I spent time mainly promoting and being involved in
20 airport projects in Latin America. Also, some in the United States. And so that takes me
21 up to the Kennedy Administration.

22 KC: Right. And that's one thing I wanted to ask you about. And perhaps that's the
23 last topic for today. I know we wanted to keep it rather short. Tell me about your views of
24 John Kennedy. You mentioned a couple of times in the past. What was your view of
25 Kennedy and his role in Southeast Asia?

26 RP: Well, of course it was a bit complex. When he came in I was excited like a lot
27 of young Americans about his appeal. Obviously, I hadn't been fighting the Cold War out
28 there, I was pretty thorough cold warrior. So, I kept in touch with Lansdale throughout
29 with other guys I had served with. So, I kept myself abreast of a lot of what was going on
30 in Southeast Asia. And I must admit that initially I was very disappointed in the
31 neutralization of Laos, and I even wrote a letter to the *New York Times* about it because I

1 understood what the North Vietnamese were doing and didn't believe that that was going
2 to work to our favor,. And of course, it didn't because the Russians just didn't observe it
3 and neither did the north Vietnamese; they just took over part of Laos and occupied it and
4 used it for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So, I was watching what was going on and keeping in.
5 touch with Lansdale on the situation in Vietnam very closely. I became quite concerned
6 about it and I had business from Vietnamese that I knew. One of them was Gen. Kim
7 who was then a colonel who had come to the command in General Staff School and
8 visited me in Washington and I had dinner with my father and took him down to Mount
9 Vernon. So, I was just tracking what was going on in Vietnam and maintain a kind of
10 continuous interest in that. That got me to the point at which Kennedy was supporting the
11 south Vietnamese and the whole idea of counterinsurgency. That was when Lansdale was
12 asked—first of all Kennedy sent out advisors and they were supposed to be doing
13 counterinsurgency under Gen Harkness, I don't think it was very conventional. And there
14 was obviously a role USAID in all of this because we had put advisors out in the
15 provinces and the province chiefs needed help in local and rural development and helping
16 villages. It was kind of the same situation we were trying to address earlier. So, Kennedy
17 put pressure on USAID to come up with a plan, USAID needs to be involved. Well, they
18 didn't have anybody who had any idea of how to involve them. And I guess they asked
19 Lansdale if he knew anybody, and he suggested me. He didn't tell me, and I get a call
20 from the Deputy Director of Aid asking me if I could just come over and talk to them. So,
21 I did, and they started outlining if I could go out to Vietnam and do this study for them
22 and sign a contract temporarily of how they might become involved and what they should
23 be doing. They were already talking about setting up some kind of ten-million-dollar
24 assistance program to support counterinsurgency, but they had no idea of how to spend
25 the money, how it would work, et cetera, et cetera. They asked me if I would be willing
26 to go out and do this study, so I found myself in a position that couldn't really refuse.
27 Apparently it was also coming out of the White House, a lot of pressure, so I went out
28 and did the study. That can be a whole other episode.

29 KC: And we will take that on probably next time. But I just wanted to set the
30 background for this before we start talking about your return trip to Vietnam, what you

1 see and being assigned there again working through AID. So, let's go ahead and stop
2 there for today.

3 RP: Okay.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [7] of [14]
November 24, 2020

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager with continuing an oral history interview with
2 Mr. Rufus Philips. Today is 24 November 2020, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips
3 is joining me by telephone from Arlington Virginia. You mentioned before we turned the
4 recorder on that you wanted to go back and touch on something on your experience in
5 Laos in relation to Vietnam as well. And it was something I should have asked you about
6 last time, it's really interesting. Go ahead and tell me about that please.

7 RP: It relates to something called the commercial import program and it was I
8 guess a common practice in which then ICA or more recently USAID, the Aid Mission.
9 In order to support local government budgets, the way that they decided to do this was to
10 issue commercial licenses to local people to import products and then use the local
11 currency generated as a result to give it to the national government as part of its budget.
12 In Vietnam this supported to an extent, the Vietnamese Army, supported various
13 programs to take care of refugees, in other words local expenditures. The fear was that if
14 we just imported piasters, in other words we bought them—that was a local currency,
15 piaster. If we bought them in Hong Kong and just brought them in this would cause
16 inflation. But there was a significant problem with this political problem with this
17 program. And that is people started importing refrigerators, American refrigerators,
18 American cars, et cetera. And this became an object of enemy propaganda because it was
19 visible evidence that the US was there just to exploit the local population the same way
20 the French had. In other words, you take their raw products, and you sell them good. And
21 so, this was first brought to my attention by a guy named Cuy Kang Cuy who was
22 running the Civic Action Program. And after I got to know him he really sort of let down
23 his hair and he asked me about this. He had originally a Viet Minh background and was
24 very anti-colonial. He wanted to know why the United States was doing this, to look like
25 they were exploiting the Vietnamese and helping them only to create a market for our
26 exports. And so, I had to go and get visible evidence that at that time exports counted for
27 less than 10% of the US GDP. I put a really serious study in front of him and in that I
28 think I succeeded in explaining to him why this was set you. But I did notice this was a
29 problem. It became an even bigger problem in Laos because the Lao had almost no local

1 currency, no taxation system to fund their own government and their own army. So, we
2 initiated the same kind of program in Laos and all of a sudden, cars started appearing on
3 the streets in Vientiane, testing the streets with the elephants. And furthermore, people
4 were using the exchange rate so you could import something and the exchange rate on the
5 Lao currency of 35 to 1 and then you could sell it for piasters and get a 100 to 1.
6 Moreover, a lot of the stuff that was imported was then taken back over the border with
7 Thailand and sold in Thailand for dollars. So, it became a racket that some of the smarter
8 Chinese merchants became involved; but it became a huge target for Pathet Lao
9 propaganda. And it just gave a very unfortunate patina to honest American assistants.

10 KC: It's almost like kind of a cynical neo-mercantile thing going on.

11 RP: In other words, we were treating Laos the same way the French had treated
12 Laos as a colony in which it became an object of our exports. In other words, our motives
13 were no longer to defend them against communism, but could be made to appear to just
14 be acting in our own narrow commercial interests. So, I just mention this because was
15 one of the aspects that made I think our aid in Laos until we got to Operation Booster
16 Shot where we actually were able to deliver aid in the name of the Lao government
17 directly to the Lao villages. It generated quite a bit of cynicism about American
18 assistance and that was not helpful to our overall cause.

19 KC: Again, to me it seems like another example of "here are our intentions, here
20 are what we are hoping to do to help." But it just appears so obviously corrupt and
21 materialistic from the other side or at least it could be made to look that way.

22 RP: In general, we were used to giving aid in more conventional situations and we
23 never did—few recognized the political impact of aid was just as important as the
24 economic impact. In some cases, more important.

25 KC: This wasn't the martial plan; the martial plan doesn't work here so you have
26 to come up with something a little more inventive.

27 RP: Well, the martial plan itself had a tremendous political impact because it
28 showed that democracy could work in Europe. And it could recover, in other words it
29 was tied to a political outcome that affected public opinion. So, it wasn't just economic
30 aid, it had this political effect on people's minds. That was a very important component.

31 KC: Sure.

1 RP: To what it achieved. Anyway, was that slight addition or more to my previous
2 remarks. We can start in '62.

3 KC: That was great, and I am glad you brought that up because again it just adds
4 one more piece of the puzzle. It shows the utter complexity of this as trying to find our
5 way; the US is trying to find its way through this very convoluted maze and it isn't
6 always right.

7 RP: Also, most did not understand the political effects of our actions.

8 KC: Yeah, great point. Okay, '62 you are asked to come back for a brief study.
9 Tell me about the study.

10 RP: Well, I left in '59, I got out of the agency, I joined my father's engineering
11 business. And then in 1962 Kennedy had already gone ahead and was supporting
12 counterinsurgents. I put that somewhat in quotes because the way the military addressed
13 that was mainly in conventional terms, in other words training a conventional army and
14 advising it. And not always very well. There was an unconventional side which was
15 supported by the agency which was using a Special Forces to work with tribal groups and
16 particularly the Montagnard's to fight the Viet cong. What was lacking was any
17 participation in this effort by USAID itself. In the spring of 1962 by the Deputy Director
18 of Aid asked if I would come down and talk to him and the director about Vietnam, but
19 they didn't tell me much of what it was about. So, I said sure, I thought maybe they were
20 going to just draw on some of my knowledge of Vietnam. Instead, they asked me if—we
21 talked about my background, what I knew about counterinsurgency, what I had been
22 involved in in Vietnam. And they asked me if I would be willing to go over there on
23 contract to do a study of how to get aid involved, meaning counterinsurgency. And the
24 way it was put to me was pretty hard to turn down. So, I thought sure, I know the
25 Vietnamese, I had contacts among them, a very good friend was the acting director of
26 Minister of Defense in Vietnam at the time. I had friends in the Army, and I maintained
27 those friendships. And I had political friends that were not necessarily in support of the
28 Diem government, but were in support in general of trying to combat the Viet Cong. So, I
29 said yes and they said, "can you give up a month to do this?" And I said, I agreed. I then
30 told my father about it and he was pretty damn unhappy. I think he feared that maybe I
31 would come more involved than just taking a month off. Anyway, I agreed to go out and

1 wanted some help with somebody who knew the Aid programs, the traditional aid
2 programs. When I was in Laos there was a guy named Burt Fraily who came over from
3 Taiwan who was an expert in rural development, he had been involved in that aspect in
4 Taiwan itself and had been a very successful program. He was brought in by the director
5 of Aid Mission in Laos to help set up a rural development office in the aid mission. He
6 and I became friends, he became pretty frustrated with the USOM structure in general.
7 But he was a real doer, and he had no fear of working with somebody who was with the
8 agency at that time. So, we became good friends and I got to know how effective he was,
9 so one of the things I requested was that he be tasked for temporary service to join me in
10 Vietnam to do this service. So, I flew into Vietnam and the word was out that I was there
11 and almost immediately after I arrive I went to see at his request to acting Secretary of
12 Defense offered me any transport I wanted. I had friends who were already there and an
13 agency among them Col. Lucien Conein and the guy who replaced me in Laos. They
14 said, any plane you want, anything you want to get around in, let us know. So, I started
15 talking to the Vietnamese and they had set up this office for the Strategic Hamlet
16 Program in the palace under Diem's brother Nhu, but he had a very able staff officer
17 under him whose name was Lac. And we became pretty close almost immediately and I
18 went out—I thought what I should really do and visit the provinces and see what was
19 happening with the Vietnamese effort, which was centered on the strategic hamlet
20 program. The idea of the Strategic Hamlet Program was to encourage self-development,
21 self-government, and self-protection among the hamlets. There was a village structure in
22 Vietnam which usually combined a number of hamlets which were the villages into one
23 conglomeration of maybe four or five hamlets. The village structure had fallen into
24 disuse. It had been the village councils had been disbanded by Diem and they were
25 supposedly replaced by newly elected councils that hadn't come about. The focused was
26 on the individual villages which were the hamlets. Then you had this overall idea that
27 democracy should begin and rise slower. Basically, it was a very good idea, but what had
28 happened was it would be expanded too rapidly, it didn't have adequate funding, people
29 particularly down in the delta, moving and helping build these hamlets and move into
30 them without being compensated. So, they lost land and crops and land had to be
31 reallocated. They also made a mistake in trying to undertake this program in areas that

1 had been controlled the communists for a long period of time. They were following the
2 model of the British to some extent in Malaysia. There was a British advisor who was
3 quite influential in Malaysia, what the British did was the villages they supported were all
4 Chinese. So, what they did was relocate the Chinese into new villages and set up security
5 within the village and it was a form of population control. Well, in Vietnam there was no
6 such provision ethically and the population control approach was exactly the wrong
7 approach. So, when I got there they had gone through trying this in an area that was north
8 of Saigon and was called Operation Sunrise. And Operation Sunrise was really
9 (Inaudible) and the Vietnamese had already learned that. But on the American side there
10 was a very good understanding of what the program was all about. And I found that the
11 Vietnamese had produced a complete docket describing exactly what they were trying to
12 do. So, I had it translated and circulated on the American side, so we could all bring
13 everybody up to speed.

14 KC: Be on the same page.

15 RP: Yeah, and people would understand exactly what the Vietnamese were trying
16 to do. And the aid had been allocated a ten-million-dollar fund that was to be changed
17 into piasters. But they didn't have any idea what to do, so in the meantime, Burt Frailey
18 started checking out what could be done on the general agricultural development center,
19 and he found that we had helped them create and sell agriculture stations where they had
20 a new breed of pig, where they had new crops. Nobody had gotten involved into how we
21 can distribute this. He figured that out and we also had a logistical problem. If we were
22 going to supply materials to villages, how were we going to get them out to the villages.
23 And the thought was initially the government was trying to use the Army's logistical
24 departments, but the Army's logistical system was fried up in supporting the troops. So,
25 if they go materials they wanted to get out to the villages to develop themselves like
26 roofing the schools, and other materials, maybe it would get to the province level, but it
27 would never get distributed. So, he got together with a catholic charity program which
28 added this distribution program about Vietnam, and it worked. It was set up initially for
29 the refugees, but it worked with a guy who had an office in the Vietnamese presidency.
30 So, Burt struck a deal with them to handle our stuff, Lao worked behind the scenes,
31 informally, figuring out how we can do this and then I came up with the idea of putting

1 representatives into the provinces that are on our side, decentralizing aid out to the
2 villages on the provincial level where a combination of the province chief, the military
3 advisor—we had military advisors by this point—and little detachment. And the USAID
4 or USOM provincial representatives would compose a committee and they would make
5 decisions about funding. The idea was—what I discovered during my visits was the
6 government had pre-audit procedures where if the province chief wanted to actually hire
7 somebody to take some goods out to a province or to actually fund something locally he
8 had to submit the program to Saigon. And Saigon had to approve it practically at the
9 presidential level. This caused an enormous delay in decision making and by the time the
10 decision was made to spend the money either the prices had changed or that was no
11 longer a priority with what they wanted to do. So, I figured out that if we could
12 decentralize down there and if we could have this committee—but it was clearly a
13 violation of Vietnamese sovereign and the feeling was when I talked about it, particularly
14 on the American side, the feeling was the president would never accept this. So, I
15 developed that idea and I talked to my friend Twon who was the acting Secretary of
16 Defense at the time, and he was very enthusiastic. And he said, “I think you could sell
17 this to President Diem as a way of getting the aid effectively down at the government
18 level. You can explain what’s going on and you have examples.” And so, I went in to see
19 Diem and he knew me from the ’55 ’56 period so it went something like—I wouldn’t
20 describe it as old home week, but he knew I had worked for Lansdale and his first
21 question was about Lansdale, what he’s doing. And he asked me if I could ask the
22 ambassador to bring Lansdale out. That was kind of delicate and I understood that
23 because he didn’t want ask Ambassador Nolling directly because if he got turned down
24 then that was a real embarrassment. So, it was typical Vietnamese that he would ask
25 indirectly and therefore if they got rejected there was no loss of face on either side, et
26 cetera. So, that was among the things he asked me, but I got some credibility because one
27 of the things I told him about was I had been up in the province that had Montagnard
28 refugees in it and I found out that they had stockpiled rice in the provinces where they
29 had Montagnard refugees to feed the Montagnard refugees, but the province chief had
30 received no authorization to release the rice. So, they were sitting on it where there was
31 an obvious need on the part of these refugees. I told him about this, and he wanted my

1 observations, and this is one of them. He picks up the telephone and he calls the Minister
2 of Interior and chews him out over the phone, calls the province chief and sure enough
3 the rice got delivered, but I think I got a considerable amount of credibility out of that.
4 Anyway, I explained the idea to him in terms of it would be joint decision making in
5 order to insulate the province chiefs against claims that he was doing something illegal, I
6 explained how the pre-audit system was working. And I said, “we are not there to make
7 decisions for him, but this will give him some support.” So, Diem bought it. So, here we
8 are setting up what amounted to a joint government system out in the province, in the
9 course—that was the central part of the recommendations. And I came back to
10 Washington and the next thing I know I am getting a call from the White House, and I go
11 over to see the person on the staff who was really handling Vietnam. Who was the son of
12 the Secretary of Defense who committed suicide.

13 KC: Forrestal.

14 RP: Yeah. And he told me, “We want you to go back to Vietnam.” And while I
15 had been in Vietnam the ambassador asked me to come back, Diem had asked me to
16 come back. I said, “well I have to talk to my father, I have to think about it.” I didn’t
17 make any commitments. But that was a challenge that I was just hard put to refuse. And I
18 knew it would be very—not only an extreme disappointment to my father, but he had
19 never been happy with all my involvement in South Vietnam to begin with. And yeah I
20 was deserting him and what I didn’t know is he had cancer at the time, but he never
21 revealed it, so I think that was an added burden. We departed with some bitterness and
22 some tears in our eyes because I felt I had to do this. Of course, I consulted my wife
23 Barbara, we had two small children, and she was perfectly willing to go with me and to
24 support me. She didn’t hesitate, well there is a whole background story there, but one of
25 the reasons why I became so attracted to her was not just physical attraction, but we
26 seemed to be on the same wavelength on what the US stood for and represented for the
27 world. So, she was perfectly willing to go, and we made the decision to go and arrived
28 out there in September of ’62. And stayed with some members of the mission. Hold on a
29 second. Let me just take this. That was another one of those—thank to the stimulus your
30 credit card company. One of those.

31 KC: So, and the kids decided this was going to be the thing for you,

1 RP: Well, they were babies.

2 KC: Are you excited about this? Obviously you think this is important. But on a
3 personal level is there any excitement in what you are doing here, the fact that you are
4 trying to play this really important role in history?

5 RP: There was a lot of excitement because you could see the opportunity and I
6 felt very much at home with the Vietnamese. I knew—I had personal connections with a
7 whole range of them from President Diem and all the way down including his personal
8 secretary who had been a personal friend before. I thought we had a great idea. Burt
9 Frailly had agreed to transfer from Taiwan to serve as my deputy while I was there and
10 doing the study there were a number of people who volunteered to join this new outfit.
11 Which the mission head had already started creating. And even before I left there was a
12 period in which—well there were several things that had to happen. One was Barbara
13 was a permanent resident of the Untied States, but she was not yet a citizen. She was
14 doing interpreting work for State anyway, so we were able to get her citizenship in a very
15 close rapid way. So, my son was born in 1961 and my daughter was born in 1962 in
16 March, so they were babies. As I said, she was just willing to go and was excited herself.

17 KC: I am sure.

18 RP: She had a background of her father had been a diplomat and served in the
19 United States. She had been a child going to school in New York City, she was
20 completely fluent in English and very much of an American. She originally emigrated
21 from Chile. I had no doubt that she would adapt very easily to Vietnam. So, off we went
22 with obviously with some uncertainty. One of the funnier aspects of things was she
23 visited the State Department Protocol Office and was told we needed to develop different
24 types of calling cards, one with her name on the card and one with my name on the card,
25 one with both our names on the card. And I told her, “We just need one card, I don’t need
26 this. The Vietnamese already know me.”

27 KC: All those protocols.

28 RP: The arrogance and naivete about protocol and not being unwilling to even
29 thing about protocol of any importance. So, when we got over there the wife of the
30 director of Aid Mission asked her if she had these cards printed and Barbara said no and
31 she said, “well my dear, I can arrange for a printer for you.” And she did (laughing). And

1 Barbara responded, “my husband doesn’t want any cards on with both our names because
2 he said he is already known by the Vietnamese.” So, the truth is we never did print any
3 calling cards other than a joint one with both our names on it.

4 KC: What’s the political situation there nationally Rufus? When you arrive? We
5 talked about the factions, religious sects. What’s going on there?

6 RP: On the surface things were fairly stable, but I was concerned about the over
7 centralization of the government. I talked to my friend Kim who was in the military who
8 was very critical of the way the war was being combated, particularly by the Vietnamese
9 army forces. I talked to Diem who was my friend who was the leader of the Dai Viet
10 Party and was on the political outs who talked about the fragility of the government in
11 terms of political support. But I was really focused on getting this program underway, so
12 I thought if the government can decentralize itself and really come to grips with the
13 problem in the provinces, maybe things were local enough in terms of the political
14 situation. What had happened was people were alienated enough of Diem’s early support
15 and the situation was more fragile politically than I thought. When the incident occurred
16 with the Buddhists in Hue the Buddhist opposition grew against the clumsy handling of
17 that event. The weakness, the political weakness returned the favor and then Nhu became
18 a big factor in sabotaging the reconciliation efforts that were being supported initially by
19 Diem himself with the Buddhists. That’s a whole other subject, probably another
20 interview. In the meantime, we were able to get the program of assistance out in the
21 provinces focused on the strategic hamlet program. What we evolved was a system in
22 which a general agreement was made between us the government and the province chief
23 as to the type of activities we were supporting which was paying people for any kind of
24 hamlet construction. So, we started mitigating the effects of some of what had gone on
25 before and as we delved into the program we realized the government had been pushing
26 the province chiefs to construct as many hamlets as rapidly as possible. And the program
27 was obviously overextended, so we understood those weaknesses. But I don’t think
28 anybody anticipated the political crisis that arose around the Buddhists.

29 KC: I wonder what the strategic hamlet program: one how committed was Nhu to
30 this program?

1 RP: He was totally committed, and he had some practical feeling, I give him that.
2 He did make visits out to the provinces, and he did understand even though he clothed it
3 in some elaborate political theory which he called personalism. He did have an
4 understanding of the basics, but at the same time he felt the political impulse because
5 never entirely certain of the steadiness of American aid, so he tried to show as much
6 progress as possible. And if you ran up the numbers that was progress, so there was an
7 overemphasis on that. It took time to ensure some advice into the situation which could
8 then bubble up to the top saying we need to focus on consolidation of the hamlets, not
9 building the village and particularly in penetrating zones that were controlled by the Viet
10 Cong. We were in the process of sawing the program down and focusing it, but then the
11 Buddhist crisis exploded and really started undermining almost everything the
12 government was doing.

13 KC: Yeah, it really took all total attention.

14 RP: Yeah.

15 KC: What traditional Vietnamese cultural attachment to ancestral land as it
16 related to the strategic hamlet program, relocating people to move. How well received
17 was it from their end?

18 RP: Well, a lot depended on the circumstances, so how it was handled because
19 very often hamlets couldn't be consolidated in a way that they still had access to their
20 agricultural lands. So, it wasn't just a total movement out of one area into an entirely new
21 area, it was to try to consolidate in the South tended to live along the canals in a
22 stretched-out version. So, they were trying to consolidate the length, but to not loose
23 contact with their land. There was a problem also that the land reform program was never
24 adequately implemented. That's a very complex subject, but one of the problems was that
25 we had a very excellent advisor out there named Wallechinsky who had been involved in
26 the land reform program in Taiwan and helped set this up. But it never got any financial
27 support from the US, based on the idea that the tenants would then become owners would
28 pay off a loan and that money would then be used to compensate the landowners. The
29 problem was there was never enough money and the US—if we had contributed a
30 significant amount to it, it would have been much more successful than it was. It worked
31 in some areas while in other areas it never got completed. So, that remained a problem

1 which the Viet Cong exploited. The fact that at least too much of the land remained in
2 ownership of people who were not located there.

3 KC: It's an easy target of course for the VC. An easy political target.

4 RP: Yeah, as it was for the communists in the Philippines.

5 KC: Sure, sure. And that had been the case long before Diem had come to power
6 years and years before that.

7 RP: Yeah, this was a situation that went way back.

8 KC: Well, tell me about the insurgency and perhaps that will be enough for today.
9 But how did the Viet Cong work their way back into positions of influence in these
10 different areas? How did their insurgency work? Just give me a thumbnail sketch of it.

11 RP: Well, they had left behind a political structure. It had gone underground, and
12 Diem had tried to get US support to try to root it out of communist campaign. The
13 problem was there were too many people who had disappointed the Viet Minh but were
14 not necessarily tied to what became the Viet Cong got swept up in this thing. Politically,
15 not enough of an adequate connection was made by the government particularly in the
16 Delta, with the locals. Civic Action never achieved what it should have achieved. I talked
17 about the lack of US support on that and even thinking it's really important to connect the
18 government with the villages. The other thing that happened was the Army was taken out
19 of territorial responsibilities which would mean local security. And converted it into a
20 regular army while the Civil Guard was created as a substitute but was inadequately
21 trained and supported. So, we had a security vacuum. Then the Viet Cong started
22 assassinating local village chiefs, local government officials systematically in removing
23 by that means any kind of contact with the local government. They focused on the bad
24 officials, ones that were either not well connected with the population or some of whom
25 were corrupt, so they killed them and then they killed other officials recognizing that they
26 were the real opponents. So, what you did was you removed a level of local government
27 and they stepped into the vacuum. They were very effective on mobilization techniques,
28 all cadre were not just political cadre, but they were armed political cadre. Then they
29 were receiving substantial support coming down from the north Ho Chi Minh trail in
30 terms of arms, in terms of eventually even North Vietnamese. North Vietnamese were
31 initially something of a problem, but then they became integrated into the effort. So, by

1 creating a political insecurity vacuum, they were able to move into it. They had effective
2 kind of mass mobilization propaganda technique. For example, they would recruit young
3 men and get them involved where say they would leave some spikes in the soil so that
4 one of the local officials would step on them or they would actually have then
5 assassinated somebody, then they weren't committed. I mean this is very clever stuff, but
6 it worked. It worked in Laos, and it worked in South Vietnam. There was a whole thing
7 written by a member of the Viet Minh that I managed to get a hold of early on and
8 translated it to all of our people to describe exactly how they took over a village or a
9 hamlet.

10 KC: Let's stop there then for today Rufus.

11 RP: Okay.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [8] of [14]
November 30, 2020

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today is 30 November 2020, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 joining me by telephone from his home in Virginia. Okay Rufus, going back to Vietnam
4 full time for a basis here in '62 and you are setting up the rural affairs. Before we get
5 started you mentioned a little bit of background on getting you there on the ground their
6 full time. So, please do that.

7 Rufus Philips: I had forgotten exactly where I left off, but I think I left off where I
8 had been asked to go back out and do this job on terms I thought I could not refuse. It
9 was a challenge; it was something I was so involved in their independence of South
10 Vietnam and I knew what it was. I had a good feeling I had all of these Vietnamese
11 contacts and some of them were friends and I had been able to set the job up and this new
12 office in USAID in a way that would have sufficient independence from the ordinary type
13 of aid operation. To have a chance of being effective. So, when I decided and got sworn
14 in, that was offered—I have to tell this story because I was offered FRS position which is
15 next to the highest and I had this friend named Burt Fraily who would come out and serve
16 as my deputy. I think I mentioned him before, he was just an outstanding aid guy in
17 Taiwan and he said not to accept it, only accept FSR 1 because this is a really tragic
18 outfit. And I said, “I don’t care one way or another” and he said, “no, hold out for FSR
19 1.” So, I did, and I think the administrative folks gulped a bit, but they accepted it. And it
20 turns out he was right, the rank counted, not just in the military, but on the civilian side.

21 KC: Absolutely.

22 RP: That is kind of a side note. I started immediately trying to line up recruits to
23 come out there because I anticipated we would need people who could hit the ground
24 running even if they were not necessarily or had never served in Vietnam, but at least had
25 some experience in Asia working at the local level. To me that was extremely important
26 because I had encountered a lot of Americans that somehow just didn’t have the
27 capability to understand Asians, maybe the patience to work with them. So, I wanted to
28 be sure that we had experienced people who worked in Asia. So, I contacted Burt who
29 knew a number of people and there were people I had met up in Laos including a young

1 guy who had been an information officer up there. He was part of the Army and psy-war
2 unit sent out to help USIS in Laos and his name was John O'Donnell, and he had an
3 unusual background. He had grown up in Hawaii and he was part Hawaiian; I had gotten
4 to know him in Vietnam. And then there were two guys that had worked for Dr. Duley in
5 Laos, so I started identifying people and then there were people I had worked with earlier
6 in Vietnam when I was in the military advisory group there. There was George Melvin
7 who was a colonel in the Army who had just retired, so I started recruiting people while I
8 was still in Washington and getting that process underway. Then there were people when
9 I got out there. We had a big meeting with the whole of the mission, I asked the mission
10 director to help me do this and I announced what we were up to and what our needs were.
11 I asked for volunteers from within the aid mission, well I got only three. While there was
12 the notion that we were going to go out in the provinces, and we were be semi-
13 independent out there and work in such close proximity with the Vietnamese and that we
14 had this program that decentralized aid out there; I just think the standard of bureaucracy
15 was just not used to it. So, one of the guys I got was had been an IVS volunteer, that's
16 International Volunteer Services, was a private group that had sponsored mainly workers
17 with agricultural backgrounds to go out to various places in Asia including Vietnam, an
18 area they had mainly worked on was refugee settlement and on agricultural issues
19 associated with that. But a lot of them had learned to speak Vietnamese, so one of them
20 was a guy named Tom Luchy who was in the program and when I had gone on to visit
21 earlier, the initial visit, he had accompanied me as an interpreter. He got very excited
22 about the idea of volunteer and his rational was at last we were going to mix it up with
23 the Vietnamese.

24 KC: I can see how this overall approach going out to the provinces would appeal
25 to a certain type of person and not appeal as much to others.

26 RP: Yeah, and so then when I came out I already had some people identify to
27 serve in various positions. Of course, we had a small staff in Saigon, but we had—I
28 wanted to have four regional representatives and there were about 40 provinces and as
29 many provincial representatives as I could get out in the field initially. I got 8 of MAG,
30 the military advisory groups, permission to use their military advisors as temporary
31 provincial representatives. So, we were able to get an organization up and running pretty

1 quickly. But one of the things we had to do was work out agreements with each of the
2 province chiefs as the what the program was to be. It was focused mainly focused on the
3 hamlets and the hamlets themselves (Inaudible) —we created projects we were paying to
4 train hamlet militia. There was a miscellaneous fund which was the most useful of all
5 because we anticipated a lot of the expenses across were going to be occurred locally that
6 you just couldn't program for. For example, one of the things that had happened with Aid
7 in the past they had gotten down to the provincial level and everything was distributed
8 below. That miscellaneous fund went on to pay for a lot, some of which was
9 unconditional expenses like when hamlet militia some were killed, we took care of the
10 widows and orphans.

11 KC: Where does the funding come from?

12 RP: Beg pardon?

13 KC: Where did the funding come from?

14 RP: Well, it was a ten-million-dollar fund that had been set aside for use in
15 supporting aid and Vietnamese counterinsurgency, so what we did was program that fund
16 against a range of activities that would be carried out in the province. And a lot of that
17 had to do with paying for hamlet construction, paying materials like cement and sheet
18 roofing and other stuff the hamlets could use for self-improvement. And then in addition
19 to that, there were agricultural program that we wanted to start that were mainly the
20 Burt's responsibility and a lot of his ideas. One of them was that he improved crops of all
21 kinds and he relied on his experience in Taiwan, and he got guys from the Taiwanese Aid
22 Mission and got with guys who had already been out in the provinces helping
23 agriculturally. And they had helped develop two research stations which was developing
24 new varieties of vegetables. But the work they had done had not been widely distributed,
25 the lack was a means of getting it out in the province. There was no program to do that.
26 In the Aid Mission the relationship between agriculture departments of the Aid Mission
27 and the Vietnamese Government was purely at the ministerial level. So, there was a lot of
28 exchange of ideas, and they got a loan program, an agricultural loan program, and got
29 these research stations going, but none of it was really reaching the country. So, we saw a
30 very important element of what we were trying to do was to boost the villager's
31 livelihood, in addition—and I'll talk about what it was called. We also invented—and I

1 don't think we really invented—we started figuring out how to manufacture wells that
2 was useful on the coastal provinces for pumping water for irrigation purposes. Then Burt
3 devised a rig that could be mounted on the back of a jeep, and it could go around and help
4 drill wells for villages, again a lot of them up in the central area that didn't have a decent
5 well. One of the most radical programs was at the agricultural research station in the
6 Delta they had developed a form of hybrid pig by cross breeding with American pigs.
7 And this pig in contrast to the Vietnamese pig grew to marketable size in about six to
8 nine months and they were big whereas the Vietnamese pigs were always small rugged,
9 and it took over a year to grow to market size, they were still very small. So, we came
10 directly with the—there was an extension area of agricultural administration headed by a
11 very dynamic young Vietnamese. So, Burt directly worked with him and came up with
12 this program whereby farmers would be lent on a loan the cement necessary to build pig
13 pens. The reason why country pig pens were build was because we needed the awful
14 feces of the pigs to drain off and swept out, so it didn't cause disease into a pond where it
15 became fertilizer. And the fertilizer was then used to grow sweet potatoes which in turn
16 would feed the pigs. So, we started this program up in Central Vietnam and together with
17 the Vietnamese picked the poorest farmers to do this, farmer that didn't have any land.
18 Some of whom only had a straw hut, but could rent land, so we launched this thing. They
19 changed—somebody said this was really an agricultural revolution—they changed
20 practices of hog raising that went back a thousand years.

21 KC: That's though.

22 RP: While there was doubt among the regular agricultural folks in the mission as
23 to whether this would work or not. The assessment of the Chinese who were sort of
24 technical advisors on all of this was that the average Vietnamese farmer was actually
25 smarter than the average farmer on Thailand. So, it was sort of a leap of faith as to how
26 this thing was going to work. But it started working and because it was the poorest
27 farmers that could do it, all the farmers that had some land, they wanted in on the
28 program too.

29 KC: Sure.

30 RP: In the first year we reached about ten thousand families and the word about
31 this thing spread. The North Vietnamese claimed that they had created an equal program

1 up north which was personally and completely phony. But they were obliged to do
2 something for their population. Anyway, it was really quite extraordinary, and we had a
3 young IVS guy named Harvey Niece who was fluent in—we recruited him to come over
4 to Rural Affairs and he and one of the Vietnamese were the guys that really monitored
5 this program and he was known to the Vietnamese as Mr. Pig.

6 KC: Simple enough.

7 RP: Yeah. And there was a story actually this is not a pig story, but it sort of
8 enlarges itself into a pig story and it was told by one of the Chinese technicians. What he
9 had done was he had gone on this trip to Central Vietnam to rural villages and he
10 accounted. It was in November when it gets cold at night up in Central Vietnam. He went
11 and learned some Vietnamese and was talking with this farmer, sort of interviewing local
12 folks to find out what were their capabilities and what were they doing. And he started
13 talking with this farmer outside the door of his hut and he noticed over in the corner—the
14 hut only had two rooms—over in the corner there was this pile of straw. He discovered
15 that this pile of straw—it was fairly early in the morning—the pile of straw was covering
16 this guy's wife and a little baby because he didn't have a cloth or anything. In other
17 words, he protected her from the cold by covering her with rice straw. So, he got this guy
18 to grow him vegetables, this particular village was not too far from Hue, and he gave him
19 all kinds of advance seed and come back a year later. And the guy is not only growing
20 vegetable for market, but he's acquired a piece of land and beginning the building of a
21 brick house. And this is just kind of revolutionary stuff from the ground up, but it
22 certainly caught the Vietnamese's imagination, so the program in the sense, the economic
23 benefits were really political benefits because these people had something they wanted
24 and were willing to defend.

25 KC: You keep coming back to the same theme. It makes sense in these various
26 different aspects, whether its security or economic mobility.

27 RP: Yeah, this really contributed to morale and to the belief in the future. What
28 we found I think, and I am pretty sure this is true all over the world. And it was
29 particularly true because somehow the Vietnamese they have the tradition of very close
30 family, but also the belief that they were willing to do almost anything if their kids could
31 have a better future. And this was a clear demonstration that arising up the economic

1 ladder was an opportunity and besides that we had a school program getting schools
2 going in the hamlets. The schools were built largely by the hamlet inhabitants
3 themselves. We were able to get at least part time teachers, some of them out of the local
4 government. There was a program for training teachers by the government to get some of
5 them into the hamlets. So, we were able to begin demonstrating on the education side that
6 there was some better future out there and I think all of this combined gave a reason for
7 the hamlet folk to believe in self-development, self-defense. And that was the base of the
8 program, that was really what the Strategic Hamlet Program was at its roots all about. So,
9 our function was really to flesh it out and help give it real meaning to folks down at that
10 level and to a considerable degree we succeeded, and the Vietnamese succeeded in doing
11 that. In some province, and this was particularly true in the Delta the program had been
12 pushed too rapidly and moved out into areas that were insecure and you really needed to
13 take what was called an oil spot approach, which was really you needed to develop a core
14 and work out from there. Rather than jumping out into areas where the VC had a
15 considerable cadre in sort of rural guerilla force operating because you couldn't protect it.
16 So, it really hurt the program because once you got out there an enormous amount of
17 effort had to be extended to defend them which then took aware from other aspects.

18 KC: Sure, resources and attention—

19 RP: Another thing we added was that the Vietnamese had no, what I would call, a
20 surrender program, but nothing had concretely happened. So, I was able to bring over
21 from the Philippines a guy retired CTR Hannon who had been under Lansdale, the
22 principal deputy there and had been acquainted with the whole program, Magsaysay's
23 program of getting Huks to surrender and settle them. So, he came over and I put him in
24 contact with the acting Secretary of Defense, so they started a working group and created
25 a program called Chieu Hoi which was not surrender, but the notion was rejoining the
26 nation kind of idea, so that we weren't preaching surrender. They may have called it that,
27 but the program was preaching rejoin the righteous cause. So, we did get a lot of low-
28 level VC at the beginning turning themselves in, that was another development. That
29 program went on even as the Americans took over and they at least took two hundred to
30 four hundred VC off the battlefield during his lifetime. So, that was added to everything
31 else we were doing, and it was all managed at the provincial level by this joint provincial

1 committee and I think that was—looking long term was a winning approach, but then the
2 government ran into the Buddhist problem and that undermined overall political support.
3 And wound up with the coup against Diem.

4 KC: Right. Tell me about how the Chieu Hoi program worked. Obviously, like you
5 said this is something that lasted throughout the entirety of the American experience
6 there. How did the Chieu Hoi program work as you conceive it?

7 RP: Well, first of all there were propaganda leaflets illustrating the (phone ringing
8 in the background) basic idea—hold on a second.

9 KC: Sure.

10 RP: Hello?—What were reasonable or potential centers to welcome them into a
11 secure environment where the idea was we might help train them with agricultural skill
12 and figure out how they could reintegrate into the community. So, we funded a series of
13 these centers that were run really by the Vietnamese, but we had eventually when
14 CHORDS came afterwards, they had a full time Chieu Hoi advisor in every province.
15 And it just got barely underway in '63. But I thought it had a lot of promise because it is
16 a necessary component of the overall broad counterinsurgency program and nobody else
17 except USAID was in a position to do it. It wasn't military exactly and it certainly wasn't
18 CIA, except where they might recruit people to go back and be agents or something. That
19 was distinctly not a part of the program, it was run by the Vietnamese. And if you are
20 thinking about counterinsurgency you should know it is absolutely an essential part, one
21 of the things that was not well done in Afghanistan, nobody wanted to take responsibility
22 for. So, it sort of fizzled.

23 KC: Alright, the Chieu Hoi program, gives VC and perhaps reluctant VC a chance
24 to become a part of the larger whole. They have a future for themselves when they see
25 something like this as opposed to if you don't have surrender program like this that isn't
26 as lenient, they don't have anything to look forward to.

27 RP: That's right. A lot of them got tired and in some cases got crossed with their
28 own leadership. So, you wanted to afford them an opportunity to come in, stop making
29 warfare and killing people and maybe reunite with their families; and some of their
30 families were living with relatively secure hamlets.

1 KC: You mention on a couple of occasions both the last time we spoke and this
2 time that in spite of the efforts here working within the provinces and within the hamlets
3 providing security and sort of future, all of this is well and good, but there are larger
4 things outside of this such as the Buddhist crisis that will intrude and kind of set a lot of
5 this stuff back. Would you care to talk about the Buddhist Crisis today?

6 RP: That's a long one.

7 KC: Yeah, it's a long one.

8 RP: I may take another day.

9 KC: That's perfectly fine, perfectly fine.

10 RP: I had something that I wanted to cite. I mean, maybe it is too much to put this
11 in the recording, but I wanted to tell you what the range of tasks the provincial
12 representative was taking in a typical province down in the Delta.

13 KC: I think that would be remarkable information for the recording. Please, if you
14 feel like doing it please do so.

15 RP: Well, it is actually a footnote in my book, and this is by the same John
16 O'Donnell who was really, really outstanding. So, he lists thirty-one different tasks that
17 he had. Some of it administrative like get quarterly report from MAG, a report of health
18 report or a financial statement. A report of economic development team, dredging plans,
19 relocation pants, discuss fertilizer plants, list of militia and list of individuals trained by
20 hamlet, hamlet defense plan, discuss thirty thousand sweet potatoes cutting; that was for
21 the pig program. Chieu Hoi center funds, self-help project, generator installment at
22 particular location, a dispensary at another location, village tool kits, which hamlets or
23 villages, self-help project, trucks in Saigon to pick up miscellaneous items. Radio for
24 Chieu Hoi center, ping pong set for Chieu Hoi center, defense marks for Chieu Hoi
25 center, release table cloths for towels for Chieu Hoi center. Reactive the agriculture
26 settlement area, province three thousand piasters to build a house, cement five pigs, plant
27 sweet potato cuttings, bug a weed in cooking oil, and twenty piasters a day from working
28 to improve center, fifty ducks and ten chickens. Assign one company to guard security,
29 need organization for land reform, NACO agricultural credit and agricultural livestock,
30 provincial services, what is organization at villages level. How many villages have
31 committees, how many villages have things available through land reform? How many

1 completely own? Education, teacher training programs, self-help versus official USOM
2 sponsorship, teacher salaries, rural police, concept, identification of VC agents. Five
3 KWG generator for landings on the Him Hong River. How's that for a list? (Crager
4 laughing).

5 KC: That's all?

6 RP: That's all.

7 KC: Well, I am glad you added that Rufus because it does add a sense of reality of
8 all the things that must be done within this.

9 RP: All the things that he was involved in. So, this was his to-do list, it wasn't to
10 be all done immediately, but it was a reminder, and it also illustrates the breadth of things
11 that were going on that he maybe—some of it involved USAID funds, some of it didn't.
12 Some of it was to remind him to check on something because he had gotten so close to
13 the province chief at this particular province that he learned to speak Vietnamese that the
14 province chief was relying on him to tell him what was going on in certain areas of his
15 own province. I mean that sounds fantastic, but that is absolutely true.

16 KC: It stands to reason; especially given the quality of the characteristics of the
17 largely younger people you had working for you. A lot of real go getters as I understand
18 it.

19 RP: Yeah, they were real go getters. But then they earned the confidence of the
20 province chief they were working with. Now this was a particularly outstanding province,
21 and the province chief was probably the best province chief in Vietnam. And I remember
22 when I introduced him to John the first time when I went in the Delta and John had
23 arrived fairly early, so he had accompanied me. And I told him that I was going to assign
24 John to him, and John looked about eighteen but was actually twenty-five, but he looked
25 about eighteen. And he said, the province chief looked at me quizzically and I could see
26 what he was thinking, "this young guy?" And about two or three months later when I
27 went down there for a visit he said, he told me, "I really relied on him a lot for advice."
28 So, that just shows you what some Americans are really capable of. Also, it tells you how
29 you really can help a country develop themselves and develop a security system that
30 counteracts insurgency, but if you don't do it at the village level it is not going to be
31 successful.

1 KC: And I think that is a crux or a point that you are going to continue to come
2 across in terms of this success of this. You want to show success, the Vietnamese want
3 success, they want to show success to the Americans which always seems to lead you to
4 stay a step ahead of the growing bureaucratization of all of this. What does the national
5 government in Saigon think of this, what kind of input and role is it playing in? Is it
6 trying to change the direction of what you are doing or Washington DC for that matter?
7 How are you dealing with these outside pressures of these pressures from above?

8 RP: Well, sometimes it got pretty difficult. One of the problems we encountered
9 at this part in our program, it was going to last a little less than a year, so we wanted to
10 apply for additional funds. And Washington didn't want to add any funds and they
11 wanted to turn it over to the Vietnamese and have the Vietnamese use their funds. I
12 learned about that from the head of the Aid Mission that the decision had already been
13 made not to provide any additional funds and it would be turned over to the Vietnamese.
14 And I said to the director, "What about the provincial committees?" and he said, "Well,
15 we are now talking about Vietnamese funds, so far as I can see no reason for the
16 provincial committees to exist anymore." And really got agitated and I went down to talk
17 to the ambassador about it and it turns out that nobody had informed me at all about this
18 decision-making process and that the ambassador had already committed to President
19 Diem to turn everything over to the Vietnamese. So, I went to talk to my friend Twon
20 about it and he agreed it was going to be a disaster for the same reasons that had existed
21 before, it just wasn't that we were there to influence the program and certainly the
22 auditing side of the Aid Mission was interested in the fact that we had our hands on the
23 spending process. So, there was thinking that that's the really important part of this that
24 we are using. And I said, "no, you don't understand the problem. That's not the important
25 part, the control, it's the facilitation part that we are helping the Vietnamese make use of
26 their funds when the government is highly centralized. So, the way it worked before was
27 that decisions that were made at the central level, but decisions were being made at the
28 local level; so what you are suggesting here is going to undermine the program." Well, I
29 lost out, but I went on the Vietnamese side and kind of arranged for a big meeting with
30 Diem's brother Nhu who was on the Strategic Hamlet Program. And we had a session, I
31 invited all of the regional reps and a number of key provincial reps to this meeting. And

1 the discussion was I wanted to explain what it was we were actually doing at the
2 provincial level. And this was also arranged by the guy who was the chief staff officer for
3 the Strategic Hamlet Program who was an Army officer named Locke who became a
4 close friend and compatriot. He believed in what we were doing, and he understood how
5 this mechanism that we set up, this joint mechanism was really helped facilitate action
6 down at the local level given the problems, the administrative problems within the
7 government itself and its overcentralized nature. Anyway, we had this session with Nhu
8 and it went on for hours; it wound up with Nhu asking us— “I want you to closely survey
9 these provincial governments and tell us independently any corruption that you see.” So,
10 what happened was the US no longer funded the program, it was then completely funded
11 by the Vietnamese budget and the provincial committees remained in operation. In other
12 words, the US had a joint role in deciding how Vietnamese government funds were being
13 spent for Vietnamese purposes. How do you like that?

14 KC: (Crager laughing) Well.

15 RP: And when I came back to Washington at one point and I told some of the
16 folks in the financial part of the bureaucracy that this was the way things were working
17 out there, they couldn’t believe it. Well, that’s not any model, that wasn’t any model they
18 had in mind.

19 KC: (Crager laughing) Well, you bring up a good—

20 RP: It’s based on mutual trust.

21 KC: You bring up another good point talking about Washington. What kind of
22 pressures, if any, are you getting from Washington to modify your approach to what they
23 think should be done?

24 RP: Well, I should go back a bit. There were pressures to get the various
25 divisions, not departments, divisions of USAID directly involved. And one of them
26 surfaced shortly after I had come out there in September to run the program. The deputy
27 chief of mission had under him a coordinating committee which was a good idea
28 consisting of the operating elements of MAG, MAC-V, the USAID, USI in terms of
29 coordinating what US government support was consisted of and how it should work
30 together with the same objective. And at the first meeting of this committee, I had sat in a
31 committee meeting out there on the initial survey meeting, so I understood how things

1 were functioning. And at this meeting the director of the public safety division of USAID
2 presented this program to create a national police force in every hamlet, ten policemen.
3 We were going to put ten policemen in every hamlet and what we are going to do is set
4 up an identity card system and we are going to have check points and control all the
5 people who go in and out of the hamlets. And this was an idea that really came over from
6 the British and sort of did what they had done with the resettlement villages in Malaysia.

7 KC: Okay, okay.

8 RP: In Vietnamese terms, this was not going to work because if you did create—
9 already there was a hamlet militia idea. And if you then create a police force in a hamlet
10 you would have to accrue them locally and train them. Besides, this was putting the
11 emphasis on the wrong thing which was we were just going to exert control from the drop
12 down and that's the way you deal with an insurgency. And I said, “what this is going to
13 do is create a system where police will probably be inserted from the outside that don't
14 have any support locally, they are going to get corrupt and besides that Nhu is going to
15 believe that this is a way to float a political organization all the way from the central
16 government down in the hamlet.” Well, you can bet that they will all sort of be recruited
17 and operated through the Con Lao. Everybody, including Bill Truehard, who was a
18 deputy chief of mission was completely surprised by my opposition to all of this. So, the
19 decision was to create a separate committee to review this whole idea. So, it went into
20 study committee and eventually died there.

21 KC: (Crager laughing) When in doubt, start a committee.

22 RP: It does. When I brought the Bohannons over to help with the Chieu Hoi, I
23 appointed him my representative in this committee. And that meant for sure it was going
24 to get studied to death (both laughing).

25 KC: This idea of a national police force in each hamlet here, it seems to me a
26 couple of different things come up. One, is like you mention, the political aspects of this
27 seems to me it would quickly turn into an intelligence gathering program within these
28 villages. And two, where would the funding for it come from?

29 RP: There was going to be a massive use of part of the ten million.

30 KC: Yeah, that doesn't seem like it would be a sufficient use of funds and
31 probably would cross.

1 RP: Well, not only that, but the notion that you could cross from the top down.
2 They weren't even thinking locally, they were going to accrue people at the provincial
3 level, train them, and then send them down into the hamlets. It was just a scheme that
4 wasn't going to work and there would still be a whole bunch of people on the payroll that
5 weren't doing much of anything but could certainly help organize a political party down
6 at that level if nothing else.

7 KC: We are about out of time for today. So, let's go ahead and stop there.

8 RP: Okay.

9 KC: Alright, recorder's back on Rufus.

10 RP: You asked about the question of support in Washington, and I was lucky, I
11 got a wonderful guy who became the focus of support within USAID back in
12 Washington. And I brought him on early on and took him down to the provincial level.
13 And he really got a look see as to what was going on and he became a real fervent
14 supporter, and he had a good in with the deputy director of USAID. So, he was able to
15 fend off a lot of bureaucratic attempts at interference from Washington and I don't think
16 we had the flexibility we had without that. That Washington Bureaucracy would have
17 really closed in on us, but it didn't. His name was Stoneman.

18 KC: Yeah, I wanted to get his name.

19 RP: From Oklahoma and really an outstanding human being too. Okay.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [9] of [14]
December 3, 2020

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today is 3 December 2020, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 kind enough to join me again from Arlington, Virginia. Okay, Rufus let's pull back from
4 the day to day of rural affairs, strategic hamlet, pig program, these kinds of very real,
5 very useful, down to earth boots on the ground kinds of things. And pull back a little bit
6 and look at politics, look at the situation from the national level in Saigon primarily, but
7 perhaps from Washington as well. And we are going to look at this today through the
8 Buddhist crisis. Explain to me for those who are not familiar with it what the Buddhist
9 crisis was and how it came about please.

10 Rufus Philips: Okay. There are two religions—well there is a certain type of
11 ancestor worship that comes from Confucianism which is not really a religion that affects
12 I think both Catholics and Buddhists in Vietnam. Two major religions were and had been
13 at that time were Buddhism and Catholicism; the Catholics were a minority, but a
14 substantial minority in the country and had been particularly in the South by the arrival of
15 so many Catholics from villages in the North fleeing the Vietnamese Communists. So,
16 what happened was that going back in time, the French had favored Catholicism in their
17 colonial rule by allowing the Catholics to acquire land and to build churches on that land,
18 but to also exploit that land, which gave them a source of local wealth. But they never did
19 this for the Buddhists, and there were variations of Buddhism, but I am talking about the
20 main type of Buddhism, not the sects which were sort of offsets of Buddhism. So, the
21 majority of Vietnamese were Buddhist and when Diem came into power he actually gave
22 the Buddhists money to rebuild temples and did help them in that effort. But the old law
23 that favored the Catholics was sort of just by negligence stayed in place. Then Bishop
24 Took was Diem's older brother became the bishop up in Central Vietnam and he started
25 an active program of trying to convert Buddhists to Catholicism and this of course
26 aroused resentment among the Buddhists up there and became a factor in what happened.
27 Early on, the Diem Government tried to avoid sort of inter-religious disputes, proclaimed
28 that on national day whether there were Catholic days or Buddhist days, say just celebrate
29 the Independence of South Vietnam, only the national flag should be flown, not religious

1 flags. This was the rule, however, in February or maybe it was Christmas, the Catholics
2 up in Central Vietnam had a celebration, I think it was a Christmas celebration flew the
3 Catholic flag. So, the Buddhists resented that and when the birthday of Buddha came up
4 they flew the Buddhist flag. Then the province chief tried to enforce the non-flying of
5 religious flags on Buddhists and had civil guard take the Buddhist flag down. The
6 Buddhists started a demonstration, the demonstration got out of control, somehow some
7 grenades went off and wounded people and the next thing you know the civil guard
8 reacted and shot some people. So, this precipitated this crisis and there were among the
9 Buddhists in Central Vietnam some pretty radical member who took the lead in what
10 amounted to a kind of political uprising against the local government and then against the
11 Diem regime and this became a crisis. It spread to Saigon and there were demonstrations
12 in Saigon and the initial reaction was to try to repress that, but Diem was persuaded both
13 internally and by our ambassador to try and follow a reconciliation tract. So, a
14 reconciliation policy was proclaimed a joint meeting of Buddhists and some Catholic
15 representatives and representatives of the Vietnamese government in Saigon. A series of
16 actions were proposed to try and make up for this, there was an investigation into what
17 had actually gone on. It looked as though the problem was on its way of not being
18 completely stopped, but at least the kind of violent action that was building up was going
19 to be avoided. Ambassador Nolting had not had home leave for a long time and he
20 decided to go on home leave, which he had admitted afterwards was a huge mistake
21 because what happened once he was gone was Nhu who was opposed to this whole thing
22 and wanted to crush the Buddhists as a solution had his wife publish a letter in the *Times*
23 of Vietnam which was an English language newspaper operated by a guy names Jean
24 Gregory and he and his wife were close to Madam Nhu. Anyway, this was really done at
25 Madam Nhu's insistence, she didn't want to act independently and oppose the idea of
26 reconciliation with the Buddhists and things began to fall apart. And then there was a
27 Buddhist in the south who emulated himself in public and that became—went on the
28 water internationally, pictures of him in flames. So, then of course that caused great
29 concern in Washington and in the meantime the Deputy Chief of Mission was trying to
30 handle this, but he didn't have that kind of relationship with Diem to try to get this
31 reconciliation operation back on track. I think it started again beginning to get out of hand

1 and Madam Nhu further inflamed things by another outpouring in the English language
2 newspaper talking about what was this problem of barbequing a couple of Buddhist
3 monks. And then there were student demonstrations in Saigon, students were arrested; a
4 fair number of the students were actually sons and daughters in the Diem Administration.
5 And then I got asked by the Secretary of Defense if I could talk with the guy who headed
6 up the reconciliation effort was a Cao Dai whom I had known briefly before and so we
7 had a talk, and I came up with a plan with him which would have brought the whole thing
8 out into the open and an open examination. But that never happened and so we got to this
9 point where it became an issue for the Army and the Army began plotting the coup,
10 Nolting was away and got back to Vietnam at the last minute and then had to go to
11 Washington. He was recalled. I had also written a paper which I had written basically to
12 the Deputy Chief of Mission which I circulated among other chiefs of mission there
13 suggesting that they try to get Lansdale out there to mediate because he was the one
14 person that knew Diem had some confidence in who could talk to him. The other problem
15 was that in the meantime a hard line was developing in Washington over in state and they
16 were saying that sending in Nolting's absence instructions to the deputy Chief of Mission
17 to go over and tell Diem to do this. So, he did, and he delivered these instructions word
18 for word, and they were really demeaning in tone. So, Diem then reacted negatively to
19 that really complicated the situation and that resulted in the appointment of Henry Cabot
20 Lodge as the new ambassador. That was really a political appointment in the sense that it
21 wasn't based on Lodge's knowledge or understanding of the problem in Vietnam. It was
22 based on the idea that this was the way to get to commute any kind of response, negative
23 response from the republicans to what the administration was trying to do out there by
24 getting a leading republican directly involved. So, that was the real rationale not
25 expressed openly for his appointment and the hopes were that he would go out there and
26 his most of his counsel resolved this problem. Well, while he was on his way out Nhu
27 sort of tricked the Army into carrying out a raid on this key pagoda in Saigon which was
28 very close to the USAID mission which was a focus of the kind of Buddhist resistance
29 effort on the grounds that he had reported to Diem that they were storing arms there and
30 preparing an open rebellion. He got the Army—he used the Army Special Forces to
31 conduct this raid. Well, that precipitated a kind of openly hostile situation because the US

1 had been trying to persuade Diem to revive a reconciliation approach and stop arresting
2 people and so forth and so on. And all of this happened while Lodge was on his way out
3 to Saigon, so he arrives in Saigon and the raid on the pagodas in (French), the leader who
4 had come down from Vietnam whose name was Pak Ti Tong had fled from the pagoda
5 and sought refuge in the USAID mission which was right next door. So, Lodge decided
6 to protect him, which in terms of what was happening at the time made sense. Lodge had
7 talked to Lansdale before he came out and Lansdale had suggested that Lodge's people
8 ought to talk to me, that probably knew a lot of what was going on. So, they arrived and
9 one of Lodge's assistants, I think it was either Freddy Flot who was a foreign service
10 officer and a friend of one of Lodge's sons and I think that is basically why he was put on
11 Lodge's team as kind of an assistant, then a Col. Mike Dunn who Lodge had worked
12 with in the Pentagon when he had been assigned over there, he was in the reserve. He
13 brought them both out as assistants. So, the day after he arrived I get a call I think it was
14 from Freddy Flot wanting to come over with Mike Dunn and talk to me at lunch. And I
15 said to come over for lunch and so they did. So, what they were doing was grilling me on
16 why I know about the local situation, of course I knew quite a bit because Louis De
17 Thuon, the Assistant Secretary of Defense complained to me about the whole way the
18 thing was being handled and how Nhu was taking control. So, I sort of briefed them on
19 what I knew, and they went back to the embassy and then in the reports I tried to be as
20 truthful and accurate as I could about the situation, particularly about government
21 attitudes about what and how it was being handled and I mean those of senior officials in
22 the Diem Government. And it so happens that these memos were converted into cables
23 literally and sent back to Washington as Lodge's assessments of what was going on.
24 Well, some of the expressions that were given to me were maybe a little bit exaggerated,
25 but Burt had it, but without a lot of contexts sounded pretty exposing. Lodge decided on
26 the basis of that and an initial meeting with Diem where he asked Diem to get rid of Nhu.
27 It got rebuffed. The solution was to foster and encourage a coup. So, I was unaware of all
28 of that and then I get called down to the embassy by Lodge and I am told that
29 Washington had ordered that the embassy and ambassador to support a coup. And then—
30 because they decided Lucien was in the agency had all the contacts with the local
31 Vietnamese Army leadership, that he was the guy to help the Army leadership develop a

1 coup and could I help out because one of the key generals who was a close friend of
2 mine, Le Van Kim; Le Van was a key member of the generals who Lou didn't really
3 know and wouldn't necessarily trust. And would I introduce Lou to Kim which I did, but
4 at the same time I had a lot of reservations about this whole approach, but I wasn't able to
5 do anything actively. It sounded like this was an order from the president of the United
6 States (sounds in the background). Can you hold on for a second, this is my daughter.

7 KC: Sure. Alright we are back from that little break there.

8 RP So, anyway, the US government gets in this position that we are going to
9 support what amounted to organizing and instituting a coup. Well, that was not really
10 feasible and so the generals failed to be able to do that and so this situation then was sort
11 of back in kind of neutral. Lodge wasn't talking to Diem anymore and then Washington
12 sent out two guys to check on what was going on and this was Major General Krulak who
13 was in charge of counterinsurgency aspect in the Pentagon and is kind of a rival office.
14 He was working directly for the joint chiefs of staff to Lansdale's operation which was
15 Special Operations which was a broader thing. The other one was a foreign service
16 officer, I will think of his name in a minute.

17 KC: Joe Mendenhall, right?

18 RP: Yeah, Joe Mendenhall. Who had been very close to the political opposition,
19 to the non-Buddhist opposition to diem to begin with. And had early on sort of favored
20 some kind of approach to getting rid of Diem and Nhu. So, he goes out and talks to the
21 friendly sources he knows in and out of the government, but mostly out of the
22 government. And he goes up to Central Vietnam and he gets the Buddhist line and Krulak
23 goes out and talks to the military advisors and actually convenes a joint meeting of some
24 Army local, the Vietnamese army commanders and asked them, "are you planning a
25 coup?" Very close (laughing) and of course they say, "no, absolutely not, we're not."
26 Anyway, they come back to the US, and they have completely differing views'
27 Mendenhall's view was that the whole country was turning against Diem and was going
28 to go supporting the communists if we didn't get rid of Diem because of the way the
29 Buddhists had been treated. And Krulak comes back and says, "well, Mendenhall only
30 went to the cities, but I went out to the countryside, and I talked to the Army, and
31 everything is going ahead splendidly and the fight against communists and the Strategic

1 hamlet program. There is not Vietnamese Army support for any kind of coup.” And I had
2 come back because my father was ill, I didn’t come back with anything specifically
3 related to this mission, but the folks in state wanted me to attend. I had told them frankly
4 what my views were which was that trying to pursue the coup in my estimation a mistake
5 and what we really wanted to do and should be focusing on should be a targeted effort to
6 try to separate Nhu from the Diem Regime and I had some ideas about how to do that.
7 So, they asked me to attend this NFC National Security Council meeting over at the
8 White House where Mendenhall and Krulak were to deliver their report. And apparently
9 they had coordinated with Farstall in the president’s office, so he had apparently told
10 Kennedy—and Kennedy knew who I was and what the mission was—told Kennedy that I
11 would be there and maybe he would like to question me, and Kennedy said yes. So, after
12 Krulak and Mendenhall made this presentation I was sitting in the back of the room, was
13 asked to come up to the table and tell the president what I knew. And I had gone to the
14 meeting to some extent forewarned that this might happen, but here I am sitting in this
15 room with the president being flanked by Secretary McNamara on one side and Dean
16 Rusk on the other and Gen Taylor: the whole upper level security level of the US
17 government on the other side.

18 KC: These guys are in charge of the free world.

19 RP: Yeah and here I am. I am this assistant director in the Aid Mission with a
20 fairly important job, but, nevertheless. So, I get ushered up to the table and seated directly
21 across from the president and asked to say what I knew. I had talked to Lodge before I
22 left and Lodge did not trust the then Chief of Station whose name was Richardson was
23 close to Nhu, even though Richardson had faithfully executed Lodge’s orders, he had had
24 reservations about the way that things were being handled and Lodge didn’t trust him. So,
25 I had suggested to Lodge that he bring Lansdale out there who really understood the
26 political situation and had direct access to Diem in a way nobody else had. To help him
27 resolve this since this initial coup effort had failed and that he had the idea that he needed
28 a manager for this situation so I said, “you couldn’t find a better manager.” So, Lodge
29 bought into this idea; I have to admit that I didn’t tell him all of my motives which were
30 basically to get Lansdale out there to see if we couldn’t change the direction of this and
31 try to isolate Nhu and separate Nhu from Diem. And if anyone could do it, Lansdale was

1 the one that could. Anyway, I get up there and I present my version of what is going on
2 which is if you understand what I was saying was a different vision that either of the one
3 presented by Mendenhall or the one presented by Krulak. And I recommended that he
4 consider sending Lansdale out there to help. So, he was taking notes and scribbling; I
5 discovered later on because the library up at Boston actually had some of his scribbles
6 and he did actually write the word Lansdale down, but then there were all kinds of other
7 funny looking scribbles. And I thought he was taking notes, but he's just scribbling away.
8 Anyhow, this precipitated a discussion in which Mendenhall defended his position,
9 Krulak defended his position, and also stating that we were winning the war, particularly
10 down in the Delta. Well, I had just been down in the Delta and particularly in one
11 province where they built all these new hamlets, the VC had come in and destroyed a
12 substantial amount of hamlets, I think fifty percent at least of the new hamlets that were
13 being constructed. So, I countered with this information, well that produced as you would
14 imagine a storm. And I remember when I was talking McNamara was across the table
15 shaking his head, both during my initial presentation and subsequently in these
16 exchanges; and all of this by the way was recorded on a recording that's available that's
17 up at the Kennedy Library at Harvard. So, I went away from the meeting kind of numb, I
18 fell down and slipped because it was raining outside and cut my shin and just feeling
19 blank; wondering what was going to happen as a result of all of this. Well, basically
20 nothing happened, not immediately. Kennedy was trying to resolve because there was a
21 division of opinion that had opened up among his people between McNamara and Taylor
22 on one side and the States folk on the other.

23 KC: Why was the State so determined to take such a hard line against the removal
24 of Diem, not just trying to separate him from Nhu, but the remove Diem in total?

25 RP: Well, because they had reached the conclusion—and this had to do with some
26 influence of Mendenhall over longer period of time that Diem was just incompetent and
27 the only solution—you couldn't get rid of Nhu because he refused to let Nhu go so the
28 only solution was to get rid of the whole thing and start anew. There was at least some
29 promising leadership in the Army. This was the only solution, and they just became
30 totally persuaded of that and ran out of patience. The Assistant Secretary for the Far East,
31 who's name I cannot recall right now, but he had I think a rather authoritarian approach I

1 would call it to how you deal with the countries. He had come out on a visit earlier with
2 Farstall—

3 KC: Would this have been Roger Hillsman?

4 RP: Yeah, Hillsman, exactly. And he thought he was the world's greatest
5 counterinsurgency expert because he had been part of this guerilla group in Burma in
6 World War II, and he thought that he just knew what needed to be done. And I remember
7 him coming out to Vietnam and I took him around and tried to educate him. He came
8 away with the conclusion that well this effort, the counterinsurgency effort is just
9 disorganized because here is the CIA supporting a bunch of private armies that are
10 combating the Viet Cong and there is no central organization, and all this looked very
11 odd to him. And the first thing that the Vietnamese government needed to do was
12 centralize the whole government and get itself organized. It just reflected a total
13 ignorance of the landscape and of how things were in Vietnam and how you might get the
14 Vietnamese to doing the right thing, but there would be a lot of irregular aspects to what
15 is going on.

16 KC: The impression of efficiency isn't going to fit in this case.

17 RP: That's right. It's not like ordering the joint chiefs to undertake an invasion or
18 something.

19 KC: Right.

20 RP: Anyway, he became enamored with the thought, "we need a solution", so this
21 is his solution, get rid of Diem and surely we can turn a new page and so forth. So,
22 eventually and apparently what happened was Lodge sent in a request for Lansdale in
23 which he asked Lansdale to come out, but to take over the role of Chief of Station for the
24 CIA. And I had sold the idea to him as his personal assistant and this was just all wrong
25 because first of all the agency never appointed Chiefs of Station that were not agency
26 people on staff and Lansdale was detail from the US Air Force, he was not a regular
27 agency employee. And secondly, they knew he was a difficult guy to control; as one of
28 the station chiefs later characterized it, "he's one of the greatest open field runners I have
29 ever seen."

30 KC: Why do you suspect that Lodge would have approached it this way?

1 RP: Well, no, he didn't entirely trust Lucien's judgement and then Conein was
2 working for Richardson who he [Lodge] didn't trust. So, he thought he would kill two
3 birds with one stone.

4 KC: I see.

5 RP: Yeah. So, that guaranteed that Lansdale would have been sent out over the
6 dead bodies of McCoom among other who was out of the CIA. So, that torpedoed that
7 really quickly. Anyway, I go back out the US Government resumed promoting the same
8 course, but this time it was going to take longer and had to be better organized. So, I was
9 there, my father I found out was really in dying condition and would not last too long. So,
10 I told them I had to come back to the US to resolve matters regarding the firm, take it
11 over, sell it and maybe I could return, but I just couldn't leave my mother with the firm
12 without any leadership et cetera. I had come back temporarily to sort of get the operation
13 set up so it would continue. Burt Fraily would be in charge, my deputy and I talked to the
14 Diem Government about what my plans were and phased out. I also wanted to be around
15 if a coup was going to occur to sort of maybe help pick up the pieces afterwards because I
16 knew the guys who were in charge and so I did come back. I was there, I had already sent
17 my wife and children home, so I was there by myself. I was having lunch over at the
18 house of the guy who had been the deputy Chief of the whole military set up out there;
19 when the word came over the telephone that they were starting a coup and Lucien had
20 asked me earlier that if a coup occurred I would go and stay with his family. He was very
21 concerned about what might happen to them, he had a wife and two children there at the
22 time. So, I did that and stayed there during the coup. He had also gotten a Special Forces
23 small detachment there to guard the place because if things went array and they knew he
24 was there, who knows what would happen with his family. And then the coup occurred,
25 and Lou came back to the house temporarily and then went back out to the Vietnamese
26 Army headquarters when he was informed that Diem had been killed and Nhu had been
27 killed in this armored carrier. He refused to see the bodies. The initial reaction of the
28 generals was, "we're going to say they committed suicide" and he said, "you can't do
29 that, everybody knows he's catholic." And he was really upset because the plan had been
30 for Diem and Nhu to be evacuated by plane and the US was going to supply the plane.
31 But the plane was delayed due to a whole logistical problem because it had to be flown

1 from some fairly distant area outside the country. So, he came, and he was really upset
2 about what had happened. Of course, he told me and I just—and I haven't cried at too
3 many assassinations, but that was one of them and Kennedy was the other one. So, I
4 stayed on for a while to talk to the generals because I wanted to preserve the Strategic
5 Hamlet Program and I wanted to preserve Lac running it and I wanted to set up some
6 kind of relationship between rural affairs to continue supporting it. The generals were
7 initially opposed, they just wanted to get rid of everything that Diem and Nhu had been
8 associated with regardless. They wanted to throw the baby out with the bath water. Well,
9 I convinced them and particularly my friend Le Van Kim that Nhu and Lac who was a
10 Vietnamese Army officer had been absolutely honest and they needed to keep him on.
11 So, they deferred any precipitant decision about what to do about the program, but they
12 started neglecting it because all of a sudden the Army and a lot of power devolved out to
13 the regional demands. They started changing province chiefs, firing them wholesale,
14 changing the structure. And the Vietnamese Army activity and the support that was being
15 provided to the hamlets in terms of security was just frozen. In the meantime, the Viet
16 Cong had started a campaign of wrecking and undermining the program wherever was
17 possible. A whole bunch of hamlets started to dissolve so far and so on and it was a pretty
18 discouraging picture. Then I get back and coming back to Washington, by this time I
19 went around the other way. And I am in the hotel in the early morning before I take the
20 flight to stay overnight I see a ticker tape and I go over to look at it; it has a lot of missing
21 words in it, but it was talking about Kennedy and then blank, blank, blank, death. Jesus. I
22 was wondering what the hell this is about, so I go over and I ask the clerk. And he said,
23 "did you know Kennedy has been assassinated." And here I am in the middle of
24 Afghanistan on my way back and Jesus, my feelings just went down through the bottom
25 of my shoes. Anyway, that's my personal side of the story. What happened was also
26 Lodge really didn't understand anything politically about Vietnam and he thought, "well
27 I'll just advise the generals, I'll be the political advisor and surely they can put this
28 together." He invited me for lunch over at his house; this was after I think—no it was
29 before the coup, but I expected him to ask me about local political personalities and their
30 backgrounds and he spent his whole time telling me about how he had been responsible
31 for recruiting Eisenhower to run for president and how he had managed Eisenhower's

1 campaign. Trying to impress me with what a great politician and leader he was. Anyway,
2 he thought that we just install the generals and replace the government, won't have
3 anything to worry about and move on political advisors. And the guy who led the coup
4 who was Gen. Duong Van Minh had flattered Lodge and told him that he would really
5 appreciate political advice from him. So, Lodge was—this is actually true—Lodge went
6 to him after the coup and said, “well you need to explain to the Vietnamese people why
7 you pulled this coup in order to engender some confidence. It's a little like the situation
8 after Kennedy was assassinated when Lyndon Johnson went on and told the nation and
9 assured them of stability, that good policies would continue and so forth and so on.” So,
10 Minh says, “How did he do that?” “He went on TV.” And Minh said, “that sounds good,
11 give us TV.”

12 KC: That's almost beyond description (both laughing).

13 RP: Well, this is literally true.

14 KC: Wow. Wow.

15 RP: So—

16 KC: It just makes it (inaudible)

17 RP: I had gone home; I think a bit discouraged about the possibilities. Of course,
18 things went to hell pretty rapidly. I think Duong Minh really felt some guilt over the
19 killing of Diem, but anyway his position was, “well I led the coup, but somebody else
20 needs to run the country.” So, he wouldn't assume a leadership role, the generals formed
21 a big committee, and it didn't even accomplish what a committee could have
22 accomplished. And it sort of became a discussion group of—they did do one thing which
23 would have been useful was they formed an advisory council of eminent religious
24 leaders, both catholic and Buddhist and some prominent politicians that would act as
25 some kind of counterbalance and soften the military aspect of the regime and give it some
26 political advice, serve as a kind of transition towards an elected government in the future.
27 That got set up largely at the initiative of a friend of mine named Bui Diem who was
28 eventually ambassador to the United States. Anyway, that had some promise. Well, what
29 happened subsequently was Lodge just ignored all of that, became very impatient with
30 the generals and when Nguyen Khanh, who was the regional commander up in Central
31 Vietnam sort of hinted he thought a coup led by him would be the solution and told this

1 to the then head of MAC-V who passed the information onto Lodge, Lodge didn't do
2 anything. So, the next thing you know a coup occurred, a bloodless coup, but Nguyen
3 Khanh takes over. Duong Minh because of his reputation, because of what he had done
4 early in the Diem regime, the facts and enabling the regime to stabilize. Khanh had no
5 such political footing, in fact he had taken advantage of the situation in the sense that
6 there was a pressure on to get a constitution written and developed. So, once he had taken
7 over he delegated roles to start this. And Lou is out in the headquarters going around
8 talking to people and he comes across this major with this pile of books on a table and he
9 inquires, "what are you doing?" "Well, I am writing the new constitution." So, he wrote
10 this constitution, the elevated powers for the presidency and so forth. Khanh holds a
11 meeting down in Vung Tau which is on the coast near Saigon with all the senior officers
12 in the Army. He had submitted this constitution for the opinions of the embassy and of
13 Lodge. And the objections of the embassy had more to do with they didn't cross a T here
14 or dot an I here, that kind of stuff. And also, how it would be received in a national way
15 rather than any concern in how it would be received domestically. So, Khanh holds this
16 meeting of the generals and of senior officers and he tells them that he's gotten approval
17 for this problem, this constitution with himself as president. Some of the officers have
18 some reservations there about doing this because nobody had sold it to the public, but
19 they agreed, if the embassy approved it, it must be okay. So, they supported Khanh and
20 Khanh announces it and the next thing you know is the students are out demonstrating
21 against it, the Catholics are already opposed to what is going on, and they start
22 demonstrating. The embassy gets alarmed and tells Khanh that he can't do this, so they
23 send Lou up to—well by this time Lodge had left and he was replaced by an actual tailor
24 as the ambassador. Khanh gets very unhappy about this thing because he is not getting
25 support from the embassy and chaos is beginning to ensue, so he goes up to the highlands
26 into a retreat up there. Lou gets sent up to talk to him and try to persuade him that he
27 ought to back down and these things ought to be redone. Khanh is madder than hell
28 because he thought he had the support of the embassy and he didn't, so he curses out
29 Maxwell Taylor in some pretty rude language and says to Lou to go down there and tell
30 him this. So, Lou comes back and explains to Taylor that he hadn't been successful, and
31 Taylor said, "tell me exactly what Khanh said." So, I think Lou had gotten pretty

1 disgusted with the situation himself by this time, he repeats to Taylor exactly what Khanh
2 has to say. So, Taylor gets mad at him and in fact kicks him out of the country. Anyway,
3 there are a lot of other stuff that went on, but it became a circus. If it hadn't been serious
4 it would have been a farce our dealings with the Vietnamese. Well, there had been earlier,
5 there was an organized effort to get a group of small advisors out there, this was when
6 Lodge was still there, to sort of act informal advisors to Gen. Minh and informally Minh
7 had welcomed this idea, but then it was proposed to him in such a way it sounded
8 insulting. He didn't like that and then Lodge interpreted that as a bunch of guys coming
9 in his political roles, so he opposed. That aspect, I don't know if it would have saved the
10 General's regime, but it might have gotten it onto the right track and then some kind of
11 orderly transition to a new constitution and elections would have been possible without
12 security absolutely going to hell in the countryside. But that never happened. I don't
13 know if this is so complicated it is hard to follow.

14 KC: (Laughing) That—

15 RP: I am not trying to advertise my book, but I think (laughing) it is probably
16 more coherent as I wrote it down.

17 KC: That's alright, trust me. Let's go ahead and stop for today.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [10] of [14]
January 13, 2021

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing and oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today is 13 January 2021, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 joining me by telephone again from Virginia. Rufus, we have other things I wanted to get
4 to today while keeping up with the timeline there in the mid-1960s. I want to get back to
5 Vietnam and Lansdale and some of the other personalities, but given that Neil Sheehan
6 passed away on January the 7th, I think it would be an opportune time for you to give me
7 your thoughts and experiences with Neil Sheehan, the Pulitzer prize winning and author
8 of *A Bright Shining Lie*, a very astute observer of a number of years in Vietnam with UPI.
9 Can you tell me about Neil Sheehan, the person, the professional.

10 Rufus Philips: Well, I knew Neil because he was very active in '63 and '64 and in
11 '62 when I came back. I did know him before then and I tried to get him interested in
12 what Rural Affairs was doing and in the war what I said at the village level. He and
13 David Halberstam who I also got to know quite well personally were really interested in
14 the big war and the American advisory effort to the regular Vietnamese army operations.
15 And of course, Neil and Dave were I think enthusiastic initially about what the US was
16 trying to do, but then grew disillusioned and this was due I think to their focus. They
17 really believed with this military advisory effort everything was going to work out and
18 we were going to win the war. First they ran afoul of the Diem Government because one
19 of their friends, a French correspondent, whose name I will remember in a minute, got
20 kicked out by the Diem Government. The reason for being ejected from the country was
21 he wrote a series of a very personal articles about the Diem Family. So, that sort of turned
22 them against Diem and the Diem Government and then they were much effected by the
23 failure at Ap Bac, which Halberstam reported on. They were very much involved in
24 following what the regular Vietnamese army operations were against the Viet Cong and
25 those operations were not doing a lot of good. Where things were in the process of
26 improving were down at the provincial level and below, and that was our program. I tried
27 to get them interested in what we were doing, and they weren't interested. At one point,
28 because I was getting a lot of what you would say is criticism of the news coverage of our
29 provincial representatives that were out in the provinces; I actually called a meeting

1 because they wanted to talk to both of these guys and a couple of other correspondents
2 there. So, we had a big meeting at my house, and it didn't change the coverage very
3 much, but what it did was there was a lot of mutual respect and the correspondents that
4 we dealt with became convinced that we weren't lying to them and we weren't
5 exaggerating things. What I was critical about was they covered Ap Bac, but they didn't
6 cover an operation up in the central in which the Vietnamese Army was operating a bit
7 differently with the support of the population and actually decimated a North Vietnamese
8 regiment and that never got any coverage. Part of it was you could cover the Delta by just
9 going out for a day and coming back to your comfortable apartment. If you had to go up
10 to Central Vietnam you had to spend at least a couple of days in discomfort. It wasn't you
11 couldn't do it and it could be done, and you could get US Military help to flying up there,
12 but it just wasn't the comfortable thing to do. And then subsequently I became pretty
13 disillusioned with Neil's subsequent views in part because the geography of Jean Paul
14 Vann *Bright Shining Lie* was not fair to Van and was also very much guided by his trying
15 to make Vann some kind of symbol for the whole US effort. And that warped his
16 reporting about Vann. He was also something of a hypocrite in that he criticized Vann's
17 sexual proclivities, Vann was I think not overactive, but oversexed and over there.

18 KC: As the old saying goes.

19 RP: Yeah. Anyway, he had a string of Vietnamese mistresses, and this fed into
20 Neil's writing about Vann in this book. At the same time Neil had been married to a
21 young person who eventually came out to—not out—in the early days and he had a
22 whole bunch of Vietnamese girlfriends. So, I have to admit I thought this was a bit of a
23 hypocrisy in his views of Vann and I don't think it was a fair assessment of Vann.

24 KC: How so?

25 RP: Well, he makes him out to be this vain American who was very much
26 devoted to the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese cause, but he did not exercise good
27 judgement. In other words, he should have recognized that the war was being lost and
28 that his efforts were not to any good end. So, in that way his loyal support and
29 tremendous efforts to try and help the Vietnamese got judged in the light of he is just not
30 understanding the war. Neil had adopted this position that the war was lost from the very
31 beginning and Vann should have recognized it. So, that I think—you come away from

1 reading the book with I believe a mistaken image with Vann as a human being and as a
2 very effective American helping the Vietnamese.

3 KC: That's really interesting view. Did you know Vann personally?

4 RP: Yeah, I did. In fact, I was somewhat responsible for recruiting him after. I
5 knew him when he was out there as a military advisor, and I knew he had not been well
6 treated after the whole Ap Bac thing and he had resigned from the Army. So, I talked to
7 Rodger Stohlman who was running the Aid Desk here in Washington who was a good
8 supporter and I happened to be back here at the time. This was after the end of '63 and
9 my father died, and I had come back to Washington. I was trying to take care of the
10 family business and thought that maybe I would be able to sell it and go back out and
11 take my old job back, but that didn't work out. Anyway, I was here and in consultation
12 with Stohlman and when I found out Vann was back I called him up and asked him if
13 would be interested in coming back out as part of USOM's Rural Affairs. And he was, so
14 he came back out as a civilian. So, I had a bit of a hand in that and then when I came back
15 in '65, '66, '67 I was in touch with him, and we went on one of his wild rides down
16 through the Delta because I wanted to check on what was happening with the old Rural
17 Affairs part of USOM which had now become Provincial Operations. So, he was a good
18 guide, we went through several provinces together. I knew him, I respected him.
19 Sometimes I thought he was so anxious to get something down that he would substitute
20 himself for the Vietnamese, but that was kind of—I understand where he was coming
21 from. Anyway, I guess that's about as much background as I can give you on that.

22 KC: Yeah.

23 RP: I did know of course, and I followed what had happened with the Pentagon
24 papers.

25 KC: I was going to ask you about that because it's not just this time there at
26 Saigon riding on the war, it's keeping of course Neil Sheehan, very influential in a
27 number of ways, the Pentagon papers being a big part of it. What did you think of his
28 later work during the war such as the Pentagon papers?

29 RP: Well, I was—I knew the guy who released them. He came out as part of the
30 Lansdale team and he had thought that maybe since I couldn't stay that he could replace
31 me so I introduced him to a lot of Vietnamese and he became very close to the province

1 chief down in An Hoa and Chan Lao, I am talking about Dan Ellsberg. And Dan started
2 off, but then he got really complicated, he had this macho thing and he wound up going
3 out with the Marines. He had been in the Marines and going out on patrol; he also goes
4 into local problems because he fell for the Vietnamese mistress of a Frenchman who
5 unfortunately was a Corsica. Dan was cautioned and for a while he persisted, and
6 Lansdale became pretty alarmed because the Corsicans had their mafia there and I think
7 they would have made short order of Dan and got him to back off. That's just some side
8 gossip. I later kept in touch with Dan and when the Pentagon Papers came out I became
9 very critical of him because he failed to screen those papers, there was stuff in there that
10 was extremely harmful to the US, it had almost nothing to do with Vietnam directly.
11 There was a paper that Ed had written for inside consumption about people he thought
12 were US assets. Now when you say somebody is an asset to somebody who knows that
13 kind of inside language the agency and intelligence operations you think, "that means he
14 owns them." It doesn't mean that at all, it means somebody's willing to help us. So, he
15 had a list of Filipinos, including a Filipino congressman who would have made a great
16 president of the Philippines and this particular memo was included in a whole batch of
17 stuff that got released as part of the Pentagon Papers and of course got picked up out in
18 Southeast Asia. And all of a sudden, the people that had been part of the Operation
19 Brotherhood were tools of the Americans and anybody who was mentioned in Lansdale's
20 paper was obviously an American agent and so forth. There was a lot of collateral
21 damage done. The other problem with the papers was really incomplete. This was a thing
22 put together by some whiz kids in the Pentagon and there was a lot that they didn't know
23 what going on, so some supercilious stuff was written up. Anyway, Dan and I had quite a
24 falling out over it, he came out to the house, and we had a long discussion about it. That
25 was basically about the last time I talked to him. I have since then we have exchanged
26 messages and I have gotten over to some extent my outrage over the way he handled it. If
27 he just released the report itself I think some of the collateral damage would have been
28 limited. And then anyone who didn't know the situation kind of took off on their
29 interpretation of the report as showing that the administration had been less than frank
30 about the situation when there were a lot of inside doubts about the way we were doing
31 things.

1 KC: And that's one of the things I think that passes a lot of folks. Depending on
2 the route, there is an enormous amount of information that is kind of like a Rorschach test
3 to some degree, you see in it what you want to see in it to some degree I think.

4 RP: Oh yeah, and you could find memos by people who said that we should get
5 the hell out. So, one of the interesting things to track through it was that there were
6 several efforts made to get Lansdale out there and they were squelched by a whole bunch
7 of people. There is something of a paper trail in the Pentagon Papers in that.

8 KC: Well, you pointed out in your book. It was difficult to get Lansdale out there
9 in '65, the so-called Lansdale Mission as a liaison officer.

10 RP: But we were trying to get him out in '64 because Lodge had initially agreed
11 that there needed to be sort of an informal advisory group that could help the big men
12 transition to a civilian government and take some actions. And big men had actually
13 asked for some advice, so an effort was made to put together an informal advisory team.
14 But then it got screwed up by proposing an appointment of people who were actively
15 opposed to working with the effort. Lodge ultimately rejected it because it was presented
16 to him as this political advisory unit that is really going to give the government a political
17 advice and he felt that if anybody was going to give the Vietnamese political advice, it
18 was him and nobody else. So, that whole effort to get Lansdale out there in '64 just
19 failed. And then eventually Lodge came around in '65 and changed his mind because
20 pacification was becoming a big thing and obviously Lansdale was an expert on that and
21 thought, "well, I'll get him out here to coordinate the old American approach to
22 pacification because the country", the Mission Council was split. The problem was
23 Westmoreland wasn't fighting a pacification war at all, he was fighting a regular military
24 war to win. Pacification wasn't getting the support it needed and so that's how come.
25 And then ed got Lodge to sign off on a pretty broad charter for what he was supposed to
26 do, it wasn't just coordinate, but to be free, to advise the Vietnamese without missioning
27 the word politically. It was a charter that would have given him considerable running
28 room had he been backed up by Lodge. But he wasn't backed by lodge because there
29 were other contending forces that were opposed to give any one person responsibility for
30 pacification.

1 KC: And you make that point again in your book about these competing
2 American bureaucracies that were limiting what Lansdale would have been able to do
3 between MAC-V et cetera.

4 RP: It wasn't just MAC-V, it was the regular embassy and Ha Bi who was the
5 head of the political section and then the guy that had been Lansdale's deputy out in '55,
6 '56 was now—his name was Jorgenson—he was now the CIA station, and they had their
7 answers. There was an interview with Jorgenson by I have forgotten which correspondent
8 and it was sort of off the record. But Jorgenson talked about how we control this broken-
9 field runner (laughing.) This is one of the great broken-field runners of all time. How do
10 we control them?

11 KC: That's why it's such a great line because it says so much about the creatures
12 of bureaucracy, the way it was seen and Lansdale being so unorthodox in the way he
13 approaches things and just the overall frustration of things. The zaniness of this guy while
14 he is trying to do to them out there.

15 RP: Well, each had their own explosibilities and set operation aid, the aid
16 program. The agency was supporting Special Forces and trying to affect some political
17 connections with the Vietnamese leadership. The embassy was reporting and considering
18 that any political advice given to the Vietnamese government as their province and so
19 forth. Lodge refused to mediate, he just let this conflict go on beneath him while he sailed
20 over it and it got pretty intense.

21 KC: Someone we haven't talked about yet to very much degree is Maxwell
22 Taylor. He is there Summer of '64, '65 as an ambassador sandwiched between two terms
23 of Cabot Lodge Jr. Give me your impression of Maxwell Taylor as ambassador.

24 RP: Well, he—Taylor did not have very much political sensibility and he found
25 the Vietnamese extremely difficult to understand because they didn't always operate
26 rationally according to his view of what was rational. He tended to look down on them
27 and talk down to them, so he didn't understand. He thought, I think, just backing them
28 what they would do and by that time Nguyen Khanh in his second coup had sort of taken
29 over. So, he encouraged Khanh to sort of exercise power and Khanh got the impression
30 that well what he needed to do was convene. They had this military council and what he
31 needed to do was to proclaim a new constitution with himself as the head of the

1 government. He goes to this military counsel and talks about this with them down at
2 Vung Tau which is the court town down on the coast very close to Saigon. He proposed
3 that he proclaim this constitution, make himself head of the government, president, with
4 full power. There was a provision for the elected assembly. Objections were raised by
5 some of the military officers, and he said, "no, the Americans have already approved
6 this." So, there was just a lack of communication between Taylor and Khanh as to what
7 was going on. And Khanh actually submitted the constitution to the embassy for review
8 and the embassy came back with comments like, "you need to take into account the
9 international recognition problem and how it will look internationally. By the way you
10 forgot to cross a T here and dot an I there." So, Khanh took that as approval and then
11 when the students started demonstrating against this, Khanh was saying, "the Americans
12 approved this" and Taylor said, "no, we didn't." So, that opened up a big gap between
13 Khanh and Taylor. My friend Lou, who was sort of the informal connection with Khanh
14 and the military, also got crosswise with Taylor because Taylor asked him to go up and
15 talk to Khanh who had gone into self-isolation or semi-isolation up in Du Lac. He hadn't
16 resigned from the office, but he had gone up there to get away from the students. So, Lou
17 goes up there and Khanh tells him, "I want you to tell Taylor this." And pulled a
18 profanity. So, literally Lou goes back down to Saigon, has a meeting with Taylor, and
19 tells him what Khanh told him. Well, Taylor gets mad at this, and he calls Khanh up and
20 of course Khanh back pedals. Said, "no, I never told Lou that." (Laughter) And that
21 resolved as Taylor declared Lou's sort of non-grata and kicked him out of the country. A
22 little bit of a tinner of Taylor's lack of understanding of how to deal with the Vietnamese.
23 And then when the younger officers were taking over, he gave an (inaudible) to them like
24 they were little kids, so they were extremely resentful. I would say that Taylor as an
25 ambassador was just too much above it all, diplomacy in the best sense of the word was
26 not his forte. He had very little political sensitivity and so he was just—. And then he
27 tried to resist the influx initially of putting in US forces directly, but he did support the
28 bombing of North Vietnam, he prescribed to the notion that this really crippled the North
29 and could maybe bring them to the negotiating table. Which of course it had the opposite
30 effect of unifying the North and serving as a device for recruiting lots of people out in the
31 countryside and all over the North to volunteer to go South. He was just not equipped to

1 understand the psychological political aspects of that conflict. So, I think that is my
2 ultimate judgement on him.

3 KC: And he is here obviously during an incredibly important time. Shortly after
4 he comes to Saigon of course, the events of the Gulf Tonkin that did not occur and you
5 have the bureaucratization of this taking place, you have a push for using the bombing,
6 and eventually the introduction of a large number of American troops. What were your
7 thoughts—I know what your thoughts were, but can you please tell me for the record
8 what your thoughts were on the increasing militarization during this time.

9 RP: Well, I thought—I was all for the advisory effort, but I was certainly
10 opposed to the introduction of American troops. I never thought it would go down that
11 path. I had written a piece while the bombing of North Vietnam was under consideration
12 in which I opposed and pointed out what would widely be the outcome. So, when it
13 finally devolved into sending American troops because it looked as though the North
14 Vietnamese were going to cut through the country in half. They had really started
15 introducing fairly sizable, regular units and some came in by coast, but most of them
16 came down the Ho Chi Minh trail and looked like they might cut Central Vietnam in half.
17 I was sort of up in air, I was apprehensive about what the insertion of US troops might be,
18 but I could see how maybe the momentum of the North Vietnamese needed to be halted
19 so the Vietnamese needed some temporary reinforcements. But I never had any idea that
20 somehow we were going to land so many forces and intervene so massively and that the
21 scheme was to push the Vietnamese aside and engage the North Vietnamese militarily
22 directly in a military victory and turn the country back to the Vietnamese. And I watched
23 that whole process with a considerable amount of dismay.

24 KC: And it seems from there it almost inevitably gains momentum.

25 RP: Oh, yeah.

26 KC: As McNamara and—

27 RP: It was because many factors, but Johnson thought that by doing this we could
28 win the war quickly. He could then return back to the Great Society, so he had that
29 emphasis. And both McNamara and Taylor ultimately fed that and became supporters.
30 Actually, Taylor, I believe, was responsible for getting Westmoreland out there. So, he
31 backed Westmoreland, and the feeling was this was a really competent commander. So,

1 they just ignored the political and psychological aspects of the war and the fact that US
2 regular troops battling guerillas in the country in which the guerillas have a significant
3 advantage and somehow we were going to win the war by attrition when we were
4 submitted to attrition with our own forces and the North was not sensitive to attrition in
5 theirs at all. Could have cared less. You had to kill anybody down to the bureau for them
6 to quit.

7 KC: And again, trying to find some sort of stable leadership within a government
8 there inside Saigon proves to be a difficult thing. And we begin to see this there in '65,
9 with something Americans feel they can hang their hat on, but again we have to
10 remember all of this is taking place during a period of great political instability at the top
11 in Saigon.

12 RP: Yeah, and that was always going to be difficult. I think we could have given
13 wiser advice and Lansdale tried to do that. But there was so many contending as you
14 point, bureaucracies and points of view about what was really going on. Some of the
15 underlying problems that produced this political instability such as the religious division
16 between the Buddhists and the Catholics instead was allowed to fester. Lansdale when he
17 came in and I came out there during the initial month or so that he was getting set up, he
18 quickly learned and so did I that talking to Vietnamese that I knew, that one of the basic
19 underlying problems was the bitterness among the Catholics over Diem's assassination
20 and this division between the Buddhists and the political division, more political than
21 religious really, between the Catholics and the Buddhists. So, Lansdale when to Lodge
22 and explained that this was one of the real problems that had to be tackled and Lodge
23 said, "well, that's not pacification. So, that's just the regular embassy business, we'll
24 worry about that later, let's get on with pacification" At upper levels there is just not
25 sufficient appreciation of some of the underlying difficulties and there were people who
26 were willing to step into the breach that had good will on both sides on that divide,
27 particularly the Bao Dai. It could have been mediated, but it was not. You have a series of
28 underlying problems like that that really promoted a lot of political. Then there was when
29 Ky was Prime Minister there was a whole mishandling of the Buddhist thing up in
30 Central Vietnam; Lansdale had arranged for a meeting between the Prime Minister and
31 the leading military—the guy who was in charge of the military in Central Vietnam who

1 was sympathetic with the Buddhists to try to mediate the dispute; then he finds out that
2 the Americans decided that the way to resolve the dispute is to facilitate the shipment of
3 IC of all regular army troops up to Central Vietnam to fight and quell this rebellion. It
4 was really frustrating. That continuing kind of underlying dispute continued to undermine
5 efforts at getting a coherent government going and then there was a period in which there
6 was this advisory council that was a prominent Vietnamese leader, mainly civilian that
7 was supposed to act as sort of formal group until there were elections. The American side
8 had completely ignored then and it could have been a kind of restrained on the actions of
9 Ky and it was just not what I would call an intelligent approach on our side to helping the
10 Vietnamese overcome the divisions rather than doing things and supporting things that
11 actually exacerbated them.

12 KC: It has been said before, but it's worth repeating that the Americans kept
13 looking for American solutions for Vietnamese problems.

14 RP: Right.

15 KC: And there's your basis of the failures there. Let's stop there for today Rufus,
16 we've been going at it for about an hour.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [11] of [14]
January 19, 2021

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today is 19 January 2021, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 joining me by telephone once again in his home in Virginia. Rufus let's talk about
4 Lansdale, how about you tell me about Lansdale's next effort in Vietnam, 1965. The
5 establishment of the so-called Lansdale Mission, the Saigon Liaison Office that he
6 formed up there. What was he tasked to do? What was he trying to do and how was he
7 trying to go about it? That's three questions it'll probably take us an hour for it right
8 there.

9 Rufus Philips: Yeah. That's a pretty lengthy subject. Well, Lodge concluded.
10 There was a big push on pacification, at least from the embassy and from USAID and
11 kind of lip service was being done by Westmoreland who was all in favor of pacification,
12 but basically didn't want to devote any real attention or time to it. But was persuaded that
13 it was important. The problem was that Lodge sensed that he had a bunch of warring
14 agencies that were at war with each other over who took what kind of responsibility.
15 When he was back in Washington he talked to Lansdale about coming out and taking
16 charge of pacification and coming up with a coordinated approach to American support
17 for Vietnamese efforts. So, Lansdale mapped out a kind of charter for himself which gave
18 him a lot of elbow room in terms of being able to address overall political problems as
19 part of the solution to pacification. In other words, you had to unify the Vietnamese
20 Government in terms of what they were trying to do and to develop a coordinated
21 program that the Americans could then support. So, Lodge bought onto that, and
22 Lansdale started recruiting people who had been working for him in various capacities.
23 Some were already on sight, Lou was already out there and had extremely valuable
24 contacts, particularly with the military, but some of the local politicians on the
25 Vietnamese side. Lansdale had retained a lot of credibility, he was with the Army who
26 understood that he was unhappy about what happened to Diem, but he had a certain
27 degree of trust among the key military people. So, he came out with this mission, now
28 included in the mission he had recruited a guy out of the Defense Department named
29 Mike Deutch who was an economist. He was a part of Lansdale's team to address

1 economic problems, underlying what was going on. So, he had pretty much people across
2 the board. He asked me to come out with him and I couldn't do that because I was
3 running this engineering firm, but I agreed to come out for a month and help him get
4 started. He understood that you couldn't operate the way he wanted to operate which was
5 to have easy access to a full range of Vietnamese by simply working out of some office
6 down at the embassy. So, he set up headquarters in a large villa and part of the teams
7 stayed in the villa. Some of the team lodged elsewhere. So, when I came out I stayed in
8 the villa, and my job was to help the team and Lansdale reestablish contact because I
9 knew so many of the key Vietnamese. One of whom was at the time Lansdale came out,
10 Ky was the Prime Minister and Ky was the effective operating part of the government at
11 this time and his chief advisor was a guy named Bui Diem who had been a personal
12 friend of mine since 1954.

13 KC: You guys had a long history together.

14 RP: That's right. So, what I did was my mission was to go out and sort of
15 get a feel for the situation that Lansdale was facing and what the Vietnamese were up
16 against. I spent quite a bit of time with Bui Diem. One of things that came out of that was
17 there was a tremendous amount of division between the Catholics and the Buddhists
18 which was undermining the ability of the government to operate correctly. And this grew
19 out of course of the assassination of Diem which the Catholic blamed on the Buddhist.
20 So, Bui Diem said he thought that was probably the number one problem that needed to
21 be addressed ahead of everything else and he and I suggested some ways that this could
22 be done. There was one person who was a general in the Cao Dai who had good relations
23 with all sides and the thought was we could begin working through him. And Lansdale's
24 reputation with the Cao Dai was off the roof, they completely trusted him. Then I went
25 around and took a look at how pacification was working in my old office which had
26 become the Assistant Director for Operations instead of Rural Affairs. And I found that
27 the existing mission director had started giving authority to regional representatives and
28 so there was a clash going on between the local level that wasn't reflected accurately all
29 the way up the chain of command and there needed to be some resolution of that
30 problem. So, I wrote up a long memo about that, it wasn't Lansdale couldn't handle that;
31 I tried to introduce and did introduce Dan Ellsberg who Lansdale had recruited out as a

1 young guy, very brave. This was to try to do some of what I might have been doing for
2 which is liaising with a wide variety of Vietnamese and increasing Lansdale's outreach.
3 He couldn't meet with everybody. So, I introduced Dan to several, but Dan was off on his
4 own mission. He was ex-marine and anxious to get into combat; he got himself involved
5 in that and I did introduce him to the province chief down in Can Hoa to Colonel Chao
6 who began to rise through the ranks. He had been replaced as province chief and was
7 then going to be put into coordinate pacification. That was basically my mission which I
8 spent almost I guess about a month out there. Then what happened was that the deal with
9 coming out Lansdale, not on his own making, had generated a lot of press comment about
10 if this magical guy was going to come out and tell everybody what to do. There was a
11 feeling among the established agencies that was already trying to figure out how to resist
12 and Lansdale encouraged into their feelings of responsibility and that included principally
13 the CIA and the Aid Mission, and the USIS was run by—. All those names don't come to
14 me.

15 KC: It was Xorthian wasn't it?

16 RP: Yeah. Xorthian. They would tell us their protocols and their prerogatives of
17 their agency so there a lot of good ideas. One of the guys that came out was Hank Miller
18 who had been in USIA and had a lot of good ideas, but they involved working with the
19 Vietnamese. So, it was almost automatic rejection of Lansdale, invading everybody's
20 turf. I think I said before that the existing CIA station chief called and broke a concealed
21 runner. It was actually a correspondent that informed them. The station chief was a guy
22 named Jorgenson who worked with Lansdale before and he was informed by the fact that
23 Lansdale was coming out, he didn't know that and never received word for some reason
24 from his own agency. So, it was in that conversation that he referred to him as that
25 broken field. (Laughter) It was obvious to the correspondent that talked to him that he
26 was already figuring out how to defend his turf. So, Lansdale encountered problems of
27 complaints, and then there was a complaint within the embassy itself where the political
28 section considered anything political was their responsibility. That didn't involve
29 pacification, pacification was somehow immaculate operation that didn't touch on
30 military factors, aid factors, psychological war factors or information factors. And of
31 course, it touched on all of these and was mainly political in nature. The opposition rose

1 and Lodge wanted to skate above it and beside he thought he was the one, and the only
2 one, to be giving real political advice to the Vietnamese Government. Wherever Lansdale
3 turned he was being blocked and also he asked for some small amount of funding to just
4 take some few initiatives that might cost something, but not a lot. And he didn't get that.
5 Then basically Lodge refused to back him up and when he went to Lodge about the
6 underlying political problems, particularly the religious problems Lodge said, "that's not
7 in your purview. Talk to me or the agency to handle that." Well, he had no constructive
8 ideas about how to deal with it, they didn't have any operational focus on how you might
9 do something like this as Americans, as Americans who were sort of woven into the
10 Vietnamese fabric. Eventually, Lansdale got taken out of the pacification role and
11 became sort of an advisor and the Vietnamese came to see him and continued to talk to
12 him, but decisions were made without consulting him. For a time, he was part of the
13 senior council, Mission council that was created and one step above the operational
14 various agencies and it was the agency chiefs. He was able to raise his shoes, but then he
15 was taken out of that, so Sam Wilson, who had been the head of operations in USAID
16 and replaced me, eventually became Lieutenant General Sam Wilson, who became the
17 secretary of the Mission Council. As the staff person he would have to go brief Lansdale
18 on the official Mission Council meeting. So, this is extremely frustrating, particularly if
19 you understood if you didn't deal with the political side of this problem and you weren't
20 influencing the Vietnamese to work together to try to overcome some very natural
21 obstacles that Lansdale did succeed in doing. He was able to promote a unified doctrine
22 on the Vietnamese side and he was able to promote a coordinating mechanism and the
23 idea of special training for people who would work in the provinces to promote what was
24 Hamlet and Village Development both political in self-defense terms so forth and so on.
25 And he was unable to get much support out of the military because the focus there was
26 until Corps were formed on pure military action against the Viet Cong and the North
27 Vietnamese. So, I don't understand, you may have some specific questions on how this
28 worked, but that's just the overall narrative about what occurred. I came back every year
29 until 1968 which was the year Lansdale left to try to help out. I was able to do some
30 things. Also, there was a bit of a fault in some of the people that Lansdale recruited and
31 that is that they were not bureaucrats and didn't fit in very well into the bureaucratic

1 structure. One of them, Mike Deutch annoyed the hell out of the economic people in the
2 embassy (Crager laughs) and in Aid because—and this was early on, this was during
3 1965. The embassy was claiming based on Vietnamese sources that the input of
4 American forces was not causing any inflation. So, Mike was a very bright guy and he
5 said to me, “can you help me get some idea of what the actual market prices are for
6 various commodities” basically, like rice. So, I had gotten in touch with our old amma
7 who was a person who helped my wife with our children and in fact we had brought her
8 to the US for almost a year and she had gone back to Vietnam in 1964 with some money,
9 dollars sold into her clothes and was able to buy a bunch of sea clothes and she set up a
10 little business hiring out her sea clothes. Anyway, I got back in touch with her, and I gave
11 her a list of commodities in local market and asked her to go and find out what the prices
12 were. So, she comes back with this list of prices and Mike comes down to the embassy
13 and he writes up this cable about what the current market prices are which don't conform
14 to what the embassy has been writing and the source is Rufus Philip's amma. Well, this
15 just upset a hell of a lot of people (both laughing). And then Mike delved into what was
16 being done about the power situation in Saigon because all the added US forces had come
17 into the Saigon area had upped the power requirement and the power was failing. It was
18 sort of special job like that, but every one of them irritated somebody and he was just
19 totally maladroit. I mean he didn't deliberately offend people, but he was very maladroit
20 in trying to work his way around the US PR and that generated a lot of resentment.

21 KC: Yeah.

22 RP: That said, the US Government failed to recognize was the tremendous impact
23 of the initial round of troop deployments to Vietnam in which the troops were allowed to
24 spend as much money as they wanted on the local market, there were no restrictions. And
25 then there were contracts being led all over the place for second base facilities and so
26 forth and so on. So, the estimate was that in say the second half of '65 to '66 that the
27 Americans had spent on the local economy a sum equal to the total Vietnamese national
28 budget, just think about the impact of that. And you had a problem with moral with the
29 Vietnamese Army that was stationed in and around Saigon because the price of food went
30 up, the price of almost everything went up. So, you had officers in order to support their
31 families taking their Lambrettas, most of the officer families had Lamrbetta scooter or

1 motorcycle, that obliged them to go around and ferry GIs to bars. Now you can imagine
2 what the impact was on morale of the Vietnamese who were pretty proud people. So, this
3 was brought to the attention of Lodge I think in '66 and the Mission Council. And the
4 attitude was, "this is just a side effect, what we need to do is get on with the war." So, it
5 is almost impossible to cover all aspects of what was going on during Lansdale's mission
6 there, but a lot was really simply undermining the capabilities the Vietnamese had who
7 were having problems among themselves in terms of unity.

8 KC: Yeah, especially, you mentioned the influx of money, the inflation of course,
9 can also have a black market which is where a lot of folks can—

10 RP: Well, we were—

11 KC: —general corruption.

12 RP: —the Vietnamese of the corruption when there was a lot of corruption on the
13 US side, and nothing was done about that either. So, it was a big rush to mount a
14 conventional military effort against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, so any side
15 effects were just brushed aside as something not worth thinking about. And the real
16 emphasis on Westmoreland and the whole military mission was to win the war basically
17 and give the country back to the Vietnamese.

18 KC: What—

19 RP: That changed, but it didn't change until a lot of damage was done. Then it did
20 change in '67 and that is a fairly well documented story.

21 KC: How much credence did you believe Westmoreland personally give to
22 pacification? How much of a true believer was he in pacification?

23 RP: Well, I think Westmoreland believed in pacification, but he wasn't willing to
24 really devote much of our own military resources to that. And then of course, when it was
25 apparent by '67 that we weren't going to win the war conventionally, he was willing to
26 exceed to the request to set up course and devolve responsibility to this combined
27 organization which was headed by a civilian but had a mix of advisory officers and
28 civilians out in the province working with and advising and providing financial support to
29 the Vietnamese effort.

30 KC: Of course, CORDs (Civilian Operations and Rural Support) and Bob Comber
31 were there in '67, I want to talk to you or have you tell me about that as well. What about

1 the constituent assembly, what were the votes there? What role did you or Lansdale play
2 in the establishment of the constituent assembly?

3 RP: Well, Lansdale tried to encourage various civilians to run. He had his favorite
4 guy was a general whose name was Kang, K-A-N-G, who was the head of pacification,
5 but also took on the responsibility for organizing the elections. Lansdale wanted to help
6 him by recruiting candidates. I got involved in kind of a side effect of this or side to this.
7 Humphrey had sent out—I think it was the '66 or '67 elections—anyway, he had sent out
8 a guy who was the democratic party chairman out in California. I'll think of his name in a
9 minute. He came by to talk to me before he went out and he came around noon and we
10 were still talking about seven or eight in the evening and hadn't even gone home or had
11 anything to eat. He was a very curious guy with a great political feel. I convinced him
12 that beyond just observing the elections, that if he went out there early he could help
13 Lansdale. So, I encouraged him to set up and be the leader of a kind of candidate school
14 that would be run out of Lansdale's villa for various folks that were wanting to run, and
15 Lansdale would do the vetting in terms of who they were. It was wonderful how much
16 this fellow adapted himself to the Vietnamese thinking in terms of how to set up a course
17 to actually train candidates. He went out there and did actually set up this course and run
18 it. Lodge was very supportive of that and introduced him to Thieu, so he started talking
19 politics with Thieu and the Thieu wanted to keep him there as a political advisor. This is
20 literally true. So, he had a lot of responsibilities including family back in San Francisco,
21 chairman of the part, et cetera et cetera. So, couldn't do that, but anyway that was sort of
22 a side life of some of Lansdale's political activities.

23 KC: And of course, getting people to buy into this thing. This notion of a national
24 government that they need to support through these kinds of elections and select
25 candidates and candidates who voters could locally identify with to represent them at a
26 national level. It's a real sticky wicket here, they are trying to do an awful lot here with
27 limited experience in something like this.

28 RP: Well, one of the people that tended to clash was my old friend former
29 province chief LTC Chao who was by then no longer in active service. He was elected to
30 the national assembly and became a leader to the assembly in opposition to President

1 Thieu later on. He then got jailed, so forth and so on, that's a whole other story. But that
2 is sort of a side light on what was going on there.

3 KC: Right, and of course the wrangling at the very top of these politics plays a
4 very big role in this as well. Tell me about these main two personalities in Generals Ky
5 and Thieu. Tell me about these guys.

6 RP: Well, Ky was the Prime Minister when Lansdale first came out and he was
7 very activist guy, young and impulsive, but seemed to have fairly good instincts and Bui
8 Diem thought he had promise if handled correctly. Thieu was more reclusive type who I
9 think was a natural maneuverer behind the scenes relying on personal relationships with
10 his wife engaged heavily in commerce which tended to foster corruption. So, they were
11 two different, incompatible personalities. Lansdale could mediate between them to a
12 certain degree, but I don't think the embassy and Lodge were in a position because this
13 required a lot of emanate contact and I don't—it just wasn't in the embassy's range of
14 understanding or capabilities to really work on this aspect and have any kind of concept
15 of how you might affect Vietnamese behavior.

16 KC: And like you mentioned before, of course Lansdale becoming more and more
17 marginalized by the bureaucracy in general, several bureaucracies, certainly the embassy
18 leading the way in this. And with CORDs and MAC-V later on. Before we get into
19 CORDs, perhaps that is a topic for another time.

20 RP: I want to say something else.

21 KC: Okay. sure, please.

22 RP: And that is if you look at what Lansdale needed which is what he had in
23 saltpans and what he had in the early days in Vietnam was pretty consistent support from
24 Washington and ambassadorial support on the local scene. In other words, the
25 ambassadorial support was not jealous of him in the aftermath of the Geneva Accords,
26 the existing ambassador was sort of willing to give way; realizing cooperation with the
27 French had failed. He came out with a tremendous backing in Washington and then in the
28 Philippines he had an admiral who you may think was a distant traditional navy guy, but
29 he was much more than that and he backed Lansdale to the hilt. So, that gave him a lot of
30 running room, you cut across agency responsibility, what they could conceive of their
31 responsibilities and that was part of the secret of his success. So, when he didn't have that

1 in Vietnam, he just didn't have the running room or the political support on the American
2 side which could have made him much more effective in influencing how the Vietnamese
3 work together, what they were doing trying to keep the quiet down, the inner Vietnamese
4 side and keep people focused on the main objective. That's one thing that a lot of the
5 observers about Lansdale including some of the good biographies, I don't think fully
6 appreciated or understood you had to be on the inside of that whole structure for
7 American presence to understand how it worked and unless there was somebody who had
8 the support from Washington as well as the local ambassador; you didn't have the leeway
9 and freedom to really pursue a coherent political course.

10 KC: This is probably the last question for the day for you Rufus. Obviously, you
11 were deeply involved in rural Vietnam pacification, getting the buy in here. What was the
12 state of affairs rurally? What was the state of pacification, say from '65 to '67 when
13 CORDs come into being? How far—

14 RP: Well, what happened was in the summer of '63 the Viet Cong had suffered a
15 pretty tremendous, not defeat, but set back from the Strategic Hamlet Program. They
16 decided to determine an attack against it, and it had been overextended where too many
17 hamlets had been built too rapidly, too much relocation of the population had occurred.
18 Some of the hamlets were actually so-called combat hamlets were erected in Viet Cong
19 controlled areas. So, when the military became preoccupied with the whole problem of
20 the Catholics versus the Buddhists and the province chiefs were left on their own; the
21 Viet Cong areas growing hamlets—can you hang on for one second. Let me just do this
22 sound.

23 KC: Sure. Before the break Rufus you were telling me about what was happened
24 to Strategic Hamlet, the overextension of it and some of the gangs.

25 RP: Right. So, then when the revolution occurred and the military took over they
26 quickly became preoccupied with conflicts within their own structure and all of a sudden
27 the regional commanders I Corps, the Corps commanders took over. And a lot of the
28 informal groups that had been successfully protecting the hamlets because hamlet self-
29 defense and protection depended on the recruitment of the local hamlet self-defense
30 forces, but then the Civil Guard was supposed to provide another level of support and
31 they tended to be pretty political. And in many areas there were informal groups who

1 were providing security support and the agency was supporting a lot of these. It was a
2 messy structure and people in Washington didn't like it and couldn't understand why
3 there wasn't a chain of command that ran precisely down to each hamlet, but this was the
4 way it was. Well, all the Catholic groups of—I wouldn't call them militia, they were at a
5 district level. They were disbanded, some private forces that had some association with
6 Diem was disbanded, and so the military didn't take up, that is the Army who had some
7 responsibility didn't take up the responsibility. So, all of a sudden a lot of hamlets were
8 vulnerable. And besides this was in his favor, the former—I won't present—he said,
9 "what the f is Strategic Hamlet?" in the first meeting with my friend Col. Lac who had
10 been the staff person in charge, so there was a lot of patient explanation going on in
11 which I was involved in that before I had come back to try to not throw the baby out
12 with the bathwater. In fact, a lot of the parts of the baby were thrown out with the
13 bathwater and there was a lot of uncertainty of whether the thing should be supported at
14 all, and the Viet Cong just walked into a vacuum there. So, rural security had deteriorated
15 considerably in a whole number of areas. My friend Chao had been sent by Diem up to
16 Da Nang to try to work with the Buddhists and calm the situation up there which he did
17 very successfully with the Buddhists themselves. There is a side story there which kind of
18 undercuts the whole things of Diem being anti-Buddhist. When Diem asked him to take
19 this assignment Chao asked President Diem if he had any instructions and Diem's
20 instruction was do what you think is right. So, anyway Chao was successful in doing that,
21 but he was no longer province chief and a whole year would elapse '64 before—in the
22 time of Gen. Kang before Kang was removed and younger officers took over. The
23 province went pretty much to hell, so when Chao comes back in '65 he finds he's back at
24 the starting line where he was back in '61 when he was first appointed province chief,
25 and he had to do it all over again. So, this was the kind of situation that pacification was
26 facing when the Ky Government finally began to come up with a coherent government
27 and a coherent approach to the problem. The Kang Government just neglected it, it was
28 all about sort of Kang himself and his trying to take over the whole government and make
29 himself president so the lack of attention to the problem after the first one who was sort
30 of anti-hamlet program continued although Kang did revive the program and call it by a

1 different name. But it lacked any consistent support from the top of the Vietnamese
2 government.

3 KC: Good that takes us to a good place to stop for today Rufus.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [12] of [14]
January 20, 2021

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today 20 January 2021, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is joining
3 me again by telephone from his home in Virginia. Let's talk about the year 1967, awful
4 lot of things going on politically, socially in addition to the increased military effort
5 through bombing by the end of the year we have around five thousand troops there in
6 Vietnam. So, inside of that, if it is possible to bring this in. Let's talk about 1967, a lot of
7 things going on, the constituents of the National assembly elections in 1967 we have the
8 introduction of CORDs under MAC-V and Bob Comber dealing with pacification. And
9 this is an area you've been dealing with you've been harping on for years and years and
10 years. Tell me what's been going on here beginning in early 1967.

11 Rufus Philips: Well, Lansdale and I was trying to help Lansdale in the embassy,
12 having been pretty well excluded from pacification as I believe in the interim Lodge had
13 appointed Deputy Ambassador Porter the coordinator for pacification. So, Lansdale
14 turned his attention to the election with some support from Lodge. There was a
15 coordinator of the election appointed who was the same general who had been
16 instrumental in sort of boosting pacification. So, I came out as I recall right before those
17 '67 elections or right after. The problem was the embassy was focused on the contest
18 between Thieu and Ky and all the high-level stuff; had neglected the council of notables
19 which was supposed to act as an interim as some check on the executive in-between.
20 Some positive developments had occurred, Ky had become convinced that he ought to do
21 something about land reform, so it wasn't all negative. In the meantime, in Washington
22 from his perch as sort of the principle of Vietnam guy, what's his name. This is still my
23 problem.

24 KC: Are you talking about Bob Comber at this point.

25 RP: Yes. I spent some time with Comber, and he really was behind the push for
26 pacification and for coming up with a unified approach and he got Johnson to sign off on
27 the idea of creating CORDS when he was a very persuasive kind of guy and a real
28 pusher. So, he came out to Vietnam and got Westmoreland to agree to back him in
29 organizing and establishing CORDS and he got it done. It was really I think a

1 phenomenon in all of a sudden the pacification military and civilian aspects were under a
2 civilian as part of the military command. And that the leadership down the chain of
3 command would be divided between military officers and civilians depending upon the
4 degree or the lack of security in the peril that the VC presented in various provinces. So,
5 he got this organized and he got it started, however he had a problem and that was he was
6 good on the American side in sort of whipping this thing into shape, but on the
7 Vietnamese side his tendency to be overbearing and to tell people what they had to do
8 offended and annoyed the Vietnamese and caused a problem. Col. Lac who this time was
9 promoted to brigadier general was still the staff person in charge when I went out there to
10 talk to him he was very upset with the problem of dealing with Comber. Comber just
11 didn't understand the Vietnamese side and instead of being supportive, was setting
12 unofficial standards for what was to be expected on the Vietnamese side as if he was in
13 command. Whereas in '67 the effort got organized and it really wasn't until after the Tet
14 Offensive and the development of a unified plan which the Vietnamese bought into that
15 CORDS began to show any real progress. Then it did begin to show progress and I
16 tracked it. I came back in '68 briefly when Lansdale was going home, and it was evident
17 that in terms of a support mechanism for the Vietnamese effort which really was being
18 led by the Vietnamese was beginning to show success in terms of establishing greater
19 areas of security in the provinces. The effort of course depended a lot of the capabilities
20 both on the Vietnamese side local level and the American side. It was not even, but I was
21 able to track it with some of my Vietnamese contacts and some Americans that were
22 going out and back and forth in the years after '68 and it made steady progress. So, it was
23 working. One of the problems was of course the whole business of trying to hand it over
24 to the Vietnamese and that lagged behind simply because the Americans had better
25 communications, tended to dominate things in terms of their advisory support. So, that
26 part of it remained incomplete, in the meantime you had the beginnings of negotiations
27 with the North Vietnamese and that became something of a distraction and lowered the
28 morale of the South Vietnamese. So, we get to the CHORDS and south of the parallel,
29 much of the territory was largely pacified, but there was always the problem which was
30 permitted in the CHORDS that the Vietnamese had left two divisions inside of South
31 Vietnam. And you know what happened after that was their capability of building a

1 pipeline in a highway all the way down into South Vietnam so they could then eventually
2 move their troops en-mass into the border areas around South Vietnam and begin the
3 invasion which resulted in the fall of Vietnam.

4 KC: Sure, sure. So, what was it about CHORDS structured and as it was in play,
5 in practice that was working? I mean you were involved in this type of work for a long
6 time, an advocate of pacification and rural areas for a really long time. What was it that
7 Comber and CHORDS was doing right to make progress?

8 RP: Well, I'd say first of all the real progress started under Bill Colby.

9 KC: Right, who replaced Bob Comber later on.

10 RP: yeah, and Bill was sensitive to the Vietnamese and spent quite a bit of time
11 and had people going out for him and finding out what was really going on, on the
12 ground. And he had access directly to Thieu, so the kinds of problems that would pop up
13 he could cure either by making organizational changes within the CHORDS advisory
14 structure or by talking to Thieu and being another source of information that supported
15 the program. So, that was a big difference because I don't think whereas Comber's
16 personality was suited to getting this thing organized and set up within the US
17 Government because he knew how to work the bureaucracy and he just wouldn't take no
18 for an answer. He had Johnson backing him up and he prevailed in that sense, but once he
19 got out there in Vietnam itself. He wasn't able to accommodate the Vietnamese side of
20 the equation very well, so Colby made a big difference I think looking back you give
21 credit to Comber for setting this thing up, but then making it actually run effectively was
22 actually Colby. You look at the various accounts of what went on out there and you can
23 see that in terms of Colby using people to really understand what was going on at the
24 local level. There was a big controversy about the system they used for evaluating the
25 hamlets and that was sort of artificial.

26 KC: Tell me about that. Tell me about the rating system.

27 RP: Yeah, the rating system. The criteria, really some were factual, but there were
28 still influence by how people felt about it locally and not all of the advisors were sharp
29 enough to detect the real status of security. It was just trying to come up with a number
30 system was not very successful and the fact that it was in correct in conclusions
31 concerning a number of provinces in what was actually going on sort of gave it a bad

1 reputation. And then when people tried to evaluate what CORDs had done would point to
2 that. My evidence is and I did have a chance to talk to Colby about it. What was going on
3 out there was he did not put much faith in that to tell them what the real status was. And
4 you could tell that things had changed when several people that I knew went out there
5 and were able to travel around day and night through provinces that had been quite
6 insecure. And then a group of military officers including Gen. Binh Minh who had retired
7 by that time from the scene, took a normal car, I think there was three of them and drove
8 all the way down to Ca Mau and then drove all the way up to the parallel. Day and night
9 to test what was going on and they never got stopped or threatened. So, there was some I
10 guess you would call subjective tests of the degree of security that was probably more
11 reliable than some of the so-called factual ones.

12 KC: So, numbers of course these evaluations came under fire for wishful thinking
13 or just flat-out fraudulent assessments of numbers, but also just true enough to make it
14 founding I think looking at a lot of these reports.

15 RP: And with Americans, the same thing had happened in Afghanistan, a bunch
16 of commanders out there stand accused in kind of a retrospective view of being
17 overoptimistic and making statements about how the Afghan forces were doing their part
18 of the job so forth and so on. Well, two things here: one is Americans tend to be
19 optimistic, so if you are showing a little progress the tendency is to assume that progress
20 is going to continue. That's the way you look at it. And also, there is a bias as you report
21 up the line that you are not making any progress, folks tend to come down on you, "why
22 the hell are you not?" (Laughter) So, there is kind of a tendency to duck that question.

23 KC: And which of course we saw with the politics.

24 RP: And there's the same bias toward believing progress is possible because you
25 have some indications of it. Not necessarily looking at the long-range problems as well;
26 is the Vietnamese leadership here on a sustainable course? Are we doing enough to work
27 to turn things over to them? And this is—whenever we do this kind of stuff whether in
28 Afghanistan or anywhere else, it's a little hard to let go and it's a little hard to understand
29 deep down that it's not us doing it for them as it's them doing it for themselves with us
30 helping. And that's a big difference.

1 KC: It's a massive difference, it's a ground shift really with the way it's looked at.
2 And like you say, of course in Vietnam the United States has this tendency to see it as not
3 going fast enough, it's not meeting our own goals that we've got established, so let us
4 take care of this for you as opposed to like you've been.

5 RP: It has a lot to do with patience and not moving in a straight line. It takes a lot
6 of acculturations to understand I think what progress looks like in terms of what the local
7 society and government is capable of. And if you push that too far too fast it crumbles. Or
8 the other tendency is to not push it at all and assume that we are there for our one-year
9 job and we've done that and we've going home. Well, I am very much seized of course
10 with all the Afghanistan examples, and you probably know I've written a new book about
11 fixing fragile states.

12 KC: Absolutely. *The University of Kansas Press*.

13 RP: That's right. To address that whole issue in a large context, to try to derive
14 some principles and some strategic approach developing personnel capabilities to be an
15 effective assistant in this process to these countries that are suffering from all kinds of
16 deficits of not only security, but capable government.

17 KC: You mentioned that Ky was supportive of land reform, and I think land
18 reform would have been a linchpin in all of this, all of the work that the US in its various
19 different efforts has been trying to do; planting crops, introducing different types of crops
20 that was part of this. Land reform would have been huge, what was—

21 RP: What happened was land reform started with Diem and ordinance law had
22 been passed, it was based on the idea that the land would be turned over to the inhabitants
23 who could acquire ownership by paying off over a series of years what amounted to a
24 loan. This was similar in nature to the land reform that had been so successful on Taiwan
25 and the problem was it never got adequately funded, the US never put any funds directly
26 into this instead of the way it was handled in Taiwan. I wouldn't say it totally failed, but
27 it didn't succeed to the extent that it should. So, who owned the land that the people were
28 actively cultivating remained an issue and what Ky did was basically by decree, the
29 owners that had acquired the property were simply forgiven their loans and just given the
30 land. It was a pretty drastic move because the southern landowners were still fairly
31 influential in the Vietnamese Government bureaucracy. But it was move that really did

1 help the population support for the government, particularly in the Delta area. This was
2 not so much a problem in Central Vietnam, but it was a big problem down in the Delta.
3 So, that boosted the whole pacification effort.

4 KC: And of course, in the Delta you have the VC, and when they are faced with
5 the argument of the absentee landlord and here you are tilling his soil and all of a sudden
6 the land belongs to the people tilling the soil; that's big medicine I would think. To get
7 them to support the government nationally.

8 RP: Yeah, and there wasn't enough credit extended, the status was still
9 indetermined. There was kind of a local struggle going on between the landlords and the
10 landowners and this was very, very appealing and a real issue that the VC were
11 exploiting. What Ky did was take that issue away.

12 KC: Tell me what's going on politically in Saigon and in the countryside here in
13 1967. Of course, we have these major elections, but we also have some challengers, a
14 challenge as well as challengers taking place here. There is the constituent assembly,
15 national assembly. We have the split with the Buddhists for example, whether or the
16 Buddhists would separate.

17 RP: Yeah, the Buddhists were threatening to boycott the election.

18 KC: On what grounds?

19 RP: Thich Tri Quang. Lansdale asked me, I was there, and he asked me to get
20 involved to see if it was possible to talk to Thich Tri Quang. So, I had a friend who was
21 actually a Catholic Vietnamese who had been involved with the refugees; he was a part
22 Chinese part Vietnamese named Dr. Ho Quang Hok, or Manny Hok as he was known to
23 his Filipino friends. Anyway, I talked to Manny about the problem because he had all
24 kinds of connections, he was on good terms with the Buddhist, and he was back
25 practicing medicine. And he said, "well, I know this Buddhist priest who casts bones and
26 foretells fortunes and is quite influential with the Buddhists. And so, if you want, maybe I
27 can arrange for you to meet this Buddhist priest." And I said, "well, fine." And so, we did
28 have a meeting, we talked, I explained why I wanted to talk to Thich Tri Quang directly
29 because I explained that I understood why he was opposed to the election, but I thought it
30 was a chance for the Buddhists to participate. And anyway, he might talk to Quang and
31 begin to change his mind. So, I remember this Buddhist monk, he cast some bones on the

1 floor and on the basis of his read of these bones he decided that I was reliable. He set up
2 with meeting with Thich Tri Quang and Manny came along to interpret because Thich Tri
3 Quang's English was not all that good, and we had a meeting. He went into a long
4 harangue about how terrible Ky was and Ky was and that they oppressed the Buddhist, so
5 forth and so on. Laying out his whole position why the Buddhists should boycott the
6 election and I said, "well, have you thought about the fact that the Buddhists might
7 participate and put candidates in some of these positions, you might win." So, it was
8 apparent that he was a victim of negative talk, so we had an interesting dialogue on that.
9 And I came back and wrote a report that was given to Lodge, I don't credit myself for
10 doing this because the embassy had been trying to persuade him to let up on his
11 objections. But he did let up on his objections to the elections, which I then helped
12 encourage more people to participate. In effect, without directly saying so, he lifted the
13 boycott. It was kind of an illustration; Lansdale would cite this as a way of doing things
14 Vietnamese style, it's true in a sense that nothing was better than personal contact and if
15 you didn't have personal contact people than you couldn't establish some kind of
16 relationship that made you at least accepted as kind of a neutral party trying to bring both
17 sides together. You really weren't doing your job in Vietnam.

18 KC: What about the results in Vietnam in 1967?

19 RP: Well, one of the big results was that in my mind at least was Chao who had
20 been the province chief of this province Can Hoa in the Delta and a very successful one.
21 And then came back as province chief and then had gone on trying to do something about
22 pacification in general then had been frustrated by that and had resigned his commission,
23 ran as a civilian from Can Hoa province. It was a real test of what he had done there and
24 how people felt about him. And it was a clean election, there were no tricks used or
25 anything else, so he got elected to the assembly as a completely independent voice. He
26 pretty quickly became the part of the assembly block that was sort of disillusioned with
27 the way Ky was running things. He became afoul of Ky, although they had been friends
28 at the Da Lac Military Academy and Ky's wife had almost been burned in a fire
29 somehow my friend and his wife were there and saved her. So, there was a real family
30 debt between them, but then this political split emerged because Chao thought that Ky
31 was not handling the whole situation psychologically very well with the North's effort.

1 He wanted to start a dialogue between the two national assemblies to sort of show that the
2 communists were talking about how they wanted to work cooperatively to change things
3 in the South. He wanted to challenge them, and he was almost certain that they would
4 fail, but that would undermine their propaganda, so it was a difference of opinion on the
5 approach. He got into great controversy. His whole story is in a book he wrote about that
6 whole experience, so I won't go into all the details, but he was eventually yanked out of
7 the national assembly and thrown in jail by Ky. There was a considerable division of
8 opinion on the American side because he had his defenders. The way Ky handled that
9 really undermined support for Ky back in the West and among some US advisors in
10 Vietnam and I was just sorry to see that happen. Well, my friend who is now dead, God
11 bless him, he was a pretty stubborn kind of guy there should have been mediation
12 between him and Ky, but he was convinced that my friend was actually helping the North
13 Vietnamese and there was a law in Vietnam that if you had any meetings even with
14 relatives that represented the other side, this was a national security offense. Well, the
15 thing was—just a second let me get this all straight. Just hold on for a second, you can
16 turn off the audio. —Chao, Chao's brother was on the other side and met with him in
17 secret to try to convince him to support the North which Chao refused to do, but Chao did
18 not report this and that was a charge that Ky got him on.

19 KC: I see.

20 RP: But this was not unusual. The Vietnamese Chief of Staff had relatives on the
21 other side, and they were known to the family and know as to where they were, they were
22 in South Vietnam. In other words, working actively for the other side. Never reported by
23 him or anyone else in that family and that showed you the strength of family connections
24 in Vietnam and how important family was, so you didn't betray somebody who was that
25 close to you, was part of your immediate family.

26 KC: That's a very good point of course, the point of those bonds. Another thing
27 you were talking about with is these are the types of things in addition to the overall lack
28 of overwhelming victory that the Americans wanted for him was that these kinds of
29 sometimes petty seemingly corrupt things that he would do that would continue to hurt
30 him in the eyes of the Americans who were involved in this and public opinion.

1 RP: It's understandable, there's a lot of pride involved on both sides. Chao did
2 make some mistakes that he wouldn't admit them. Ky, after the whole thing was over and
3 Chao was a refugee here, Ky and his wife came to visit him, and they reconciled
4 eventually. But this was just a very deep personal divide. One of the ironies of the
5 situation is Chao's brother after the North Vietnamese took over completely they put him
6 on trial for failure to persuade his brother and put him in jail

7 KC: My goodness, that's crazy.

8 RP: Yeah.

9 KC: And you brought up a moment ago Rufus, and I think it's only fair to
10 continue to do this. I have asked you about Henry Cabot Lodge, I have asked you about
11 Maxwell Taylor as ambassador, what about Ellsworth Bunker? He comes in the middle
12 of all of this. What are your thoughts on him as ambassador?

13 RP: I thought that he was the best that we had out there. The problem was he
14 came too late. He really appreciated Lansdale's gift and actually asked him to stay on, but
15 by that time Bunker was appointed Ed was exhausted. He used Ed as a source of
16 information and felt that his advice was quite useful. He had a dilemma, and it was that
17 the American policy was to back Ky to the hilt, so he became a very strong proponent of
18 that and he didn't see Chao's side of the argument at all and generally supported Ky in
19 what Ky did to Chao. There were several people who tried to intervene and were told
20 hands off or else. So, I think it was understandable that he could have been a little more
21 sensible to that political side of the issue, but under the circumstances I thought that he
22 generally was the best ambassador that we had. He had that potential, but was put on the
23 scene much too late, too much water had already gone over the dam. And of course, the
24 way CHORDS came out undermined the prospects for the South Vietnamese.

25 KC: Take me through the Tet Offensive of 1968. What kind of political affect did
26 this have in Saigon and in Washington as you saw it.

27 RP: Well, it had vastly different affects. In Washington and I think the US at
28 large, it was interpreted as a real defeat and in evidence that policy and the war we were
29 losing it not winning it. And I think particularly were influential were the television shots
30 of the embassy under siege. So, that was the way that was interpreted whereas what
31 actually happened was it was a tremendous defeat for the Viet Cong who lost incredible

1 numbers of active political workers, cadre in this whole assault. And the rebellion among
2 the Civil Society in the population against the Viet Cong because of the arbitrary
3 assassinations and killings because of what they did in Hue, going down and just
4 assassinating people. They had a list, and the list wasn't just government officials, any
5 political people, including those who were opposed to the government, not to Viet Cong.
6 This had—you had civilians going down to the palace and volunteering to give them
7 arms. So, in terms of the South Vietnamese it was not a victory on the Viet Cong, instead
8 it rallied our side of the equation, but it certainly cut our efforts because I think that
9 sparked the real, real growth of the anti-war movement back here. A classmate of mine
10 from Yale, Peter Beastrom, covered the whole assault on Hue and he had a different
11 interpretation from most correspondents about what occurred because he saw the
12 psychological side of the thing. In the meantime, the impression by—what's his name,
13 the preeminent broadcaster in the United States—Cronkite. Who just had only the
14 superficial impression of what was going on, never went to Hue, never went dug into it.
15 He came back and said basically that the war was off, and he was tremendously
16 influential before. So, on the ground it became an opportunity before I think reinforcing
17 the whole pacification effort. In fact, it helped pacification greatly because as I say a lot
18 of the cadre who were sustaining the Viet Cong movement lost their lives or were badly
19 wounded or captured. The other was also very much influenced by images, you had the
20 police chief; you may remember this famous photograph of the police chief pulling his
21 pistol out and shooting this guy. Well, the background story on that was this guy had
22 assassinated some key police officials in their homes and he didn't just kill the officials,
23 killed their wives and killed all of their children. So, outraged he acted the way he did.
24 Well, that was taken—that's typical of the way our side is treating the other side without
25 understanding much of the background.

26 KC: Yeah, that picture obviously is one of the most significant to come of the
27 Vietnam War of all the significant photographs and of videos, that certainly stands out as
28 the top.

29 RP: Well, there was another one of course, of this young girl escaping napalm.

30 KC: Sure.

1 RP: And the implication was that the Americans had dropped the napalm and it
2 wasn't. It was South Vietnamese Air Force that dropped the napalm.

3 KC: Yeah, the little girl Kim Phuc. Well, something I haven't asked you about in
4 quite a while during our discussions here and I would be remiss if I didn't. Let's go back
5 to Rufus Philips and the Rufus Philips personal life. 1967, 1968 what's going on with you
6 back in the states during your jaunts to Vietnam.

7 RP: Well, I was running an international consulting engineering firm and we were
8 specializing airports. We had projects all over the world, we worked eventually in forty
9 different countries. The biggest project we had was a plane design of the new
10 international airport which started out to be a hundred-million-dollar project that
11 ballooned into a 2.2-million-dollar project.

12 KC: As they are wont to do (laughing).

13 RP: And taking up a lot of time and attention because of all kinds of sensitivities
14 of working in Saudi Arabia. So, I was spending quite a bit of time traveling because we
15 had projects in Latin America, project in Malaysia, another one in Indonesia. So, I had a
16 wife and children by this time were in their teens except for the youngest one. It was a
17 different kind of life, and I was stretching quite a bit to get as much support as I could to
18 what Lansdale was trying to do out there. Somehow the business survived (laughing).

19 KC: How are you staying abreast with what's going on over there with so much
20 going on in your personal life, married and kids, this ongoing business.

21 RP: Well, I was getting informal reports from Saigon, and they had a system
22 which was an international call system. I have forgotten what exactly it was, but I could
23 speak to Lansdale directly in Vietnam by dialing a certain number which was managed
24 by the Pentagon and get through to Lansdale. So, if there was something that he thought I
25 should know and maybe I should go over and talk to whoever was in the White House
26 acting as coordinator for Vietnam or somewhere else, he could communicate with me.
27 So, a lot of that was just verbal over the phone. And then I would come back from a trip
28 and hadn't heard from him, so I would call him up and sometimes he wouldn't answer
29 the phone, sometimes Joe Reddick who was back up there would answer the phone. Then
30 I knew several people; Dave Hudson who was sort of further down the line, but it was all
31 this pretty collegial group. I would be reading the newspapers and be curious, wondering

1 what the hell is going on with such and such. So, anyway, I didn't give them as much
2 support as they probably deserved, but I was sort of—if they were being frustrated about
3 a particular problem sometimes they would call me up and say, “are you going to talk to
4 so and so” so I kind of fit that into my schedule. And that was a means for me to monitor
5 what was going on.

6 KC: I see. And talking to so and so that would be here in the states, correct?

7 RP: Yeah.

8 KC: Alright Rufus, that takes us to about an hour today, so let's go ahead and
9 stop.

10 RP: Okay.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [13] of [14]
February 26, 2021

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today 26 February 2021, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is
3 joining me by telephone again from Virginia. Rufus let's talk about the end of the war.
4 For most intents and purposes, you're—I don't want to say you're influences, but your
5 position to influence things that would weigh the election of Richard Nixon, the
6 Republican presidential administration and last time we spoke we talked about the Tet
7 Offensive in 1968 as well as what you had going on during that time as well. But today
8 I'd like to pick up with the final years of the war. What do you see going on in Vietnam
9 and what are your thoughts about it from say 1968 up to 1973 with the Paris Accords?

10 Rufus Philips: Well, of course I tried to stay in touch and that was mainly through
11 Lansdale. Once you became that involved in Vietnam you couldn't let it go.

12 KC: Sure.

13 RP: And I had friends who were still out there, one of them had been a provincial
14 representative when I was running Rural Affairs and then he stayed on, a guy named Bob
15 Burns, and he became very close to informed construction company with his assistant, a
16 Vietnamese named Lao Quang. So, I just kept in touch with them and reading the
17 headlines and not liking much of what I saw. It became apparent that the North
18 Vietnamese had a real hold on us in terms of the prisoners they held, and this was
19 becoming a very compelling factor in Nixon trying to get us out of Vietnam. I didn't
20 share in the anti-war movement because I was too concerned about what the hell was
21 going on with the Vietnamese people. My sister and brother-in-law came down and
22 actually participated in a march on the Pentagon. Yeah. Anyway, that left no lingering
23 business, I understood where they were coming from.

24 KC: Sure, sure.

25 RP: And it was very hard to talk to anybody about Vietnam because all of the
26 concepts about the politics and the Vietnamese taking care of themselves, of course the
27 whole program was meant to bring the Vietnamese up to where they could take care of
28 themselves. But then the Congress cut the aid and it was very apparent to the Vietnamese,
29 that most of the Vietnamese reading the signals that we were just looking for a reason to

1 get out of there. I didn't like the Accords because it left two Vietnamese divisions inside
2 of South Vietnam; to me I dreaded what I saw coming. I wasn't that much in tune with
3 how bad things were in terms of the North Vietnamese capabilities of building practically
4 a super highway all the way down into South Vietnam, but also a pipeline. So, long as we
5 had the Air Force engaged, our Air Force could keep them from massing their flanks and
6 when that was no longer capable, I knew enough about the status of the Vietnamese
7 Army and their Air Force to know that they were not in shape to put up really an effective
8 opposition. And then of course, I watched the collapse with considerable horror and
9 concern about the Vietnamese refugees. I was at that time had already been elected to the
10 County Board of Supervisors and I was serving on it and my wife and four kids;
11 meanwhile a couple of friends of mine who were not so similarly tied down volunteered
12 to go back to Vietnam to save the Vietnamese. I felt very, very badly about what was
13 going on, I could see the tragedy that was looming. And in a small gesture I introduced
14 the resolution at the Board to welcome the Vietnamese refugees and faced a lot of
15 opposition. Until I got up and gave an impassioned speech and that sort of turned the
16 Board around. Typical of civilian attitudes at the time was everybody had grown terribly
17 tired of the war and had wanted to get it over. There had been a lot of blaming the South
18 Vietnamese for all the weaknesses and problems. So, I was very conflicted, it was a bad
19 time mentally for me. Then of course, I helped in any way I could to try to support some
20 of the refugees that didn't get out. I knew a number of them, also a good number of my
21 friends died when they took over. One had been Diem's personal secretary and he was
22 not all that well, but they threw him into prison and didn't feed him and he died. So, that
23 was a very agonizing period for me personally.

24 KC: Sure, sure. Going back to Nixon's part of the war, of course this thing is
25 going to go on for quite a while when he takes over in '69 until '73. You spent so much
26 of your time, and Lansdale the same way of course, trying to bring the Vietnamese up to
27 speed, to try to create this national spirit and eventually national system and national
28 government that with loyalty. Creating this thing from the ground up. The Nixon
29 Administration is largely remembered for the Vietnamization of the war which is
30 bringing up to speed militarily. What did you see about Vietnamization that you did or
31 didn't like.

1 RP: Well, I liked the approach as I followed it in CHORDS in terms of actually
2 getting it over under the military command and then having a civilian run it. I did follow
3 what Bill Colby was doing and I got to know—I was sufficiently in touch to know that
4 Comber deserves credit for getting it started, but he was terrible with the Vietnamese. He
5 just didn't understand how to deal with them and was just sort of as high pressured,
6 demanding stuff as he was with the Americans. So, Vietnamese had a completely
7 negative reaction to him and then when Colby came in it became a lot more effective. I
8 was getting reports who were actually going out there and visiting in the years of '69 and
9 1970, 1971. My brother-in-law went out there for a couple of visits, he was on the NFC,
10 and he reported riding around unarmed in the provinces and the same thing with other
11 people that I knew. So, I knew that pacification was actually working at the provincial
12 level and that security had drastically improved in a lot of the areas. I heard the story of
13 three retired Vietnamese generals who I knew who took a car and went unarmed all the
14 way to Saigon up to the eighteenth parallel practically, traveling during the day and night
15 and not being molested by anybody. So, it was apparent that that part was working, but
16 what the CHORDS did was give the North Vietnamese such a launching pad that once
17 we withdrew any air support they were able to move their regular army and their tanks
18 and everything else south and be able to mass their forces and that's what they did. The
19 South Vietnamese were vulnerable because over the years the various camps where they
20 were, which you would expect to some degree understanding their society, the camps
21 were surrounded by all of their families. So, you had the problem of the families once the
22 North Vietnamese started that offensive. Well, of course, they attacked those bases, so
23 the families panicked and that started this flight. People thought it was just pure
24 cowardice, but it was also a desire to protect their family. A defense completely over an
25 invasion like that was not something the Vietnamese Army would really set up to defend
26 against. Secondly, they had an extremely long border, so the North Vietnamese were not
27 only able to come out of the Central High Plateau with tremendous force, but were able
28 to send troops down into Cambodia to start coming in from that direction too. So,
29 anyway, it was a pretty damn distressing time.

30 KC: What were—

1 RP: And then sure there was a fair amount of corruption, but not all officers were
2 corrupt and the system in terms of actually providing security to the hamlets with the
3 support of the population was actually working. And a lot of the programs we started on
4 economic development were carried forward as South Vietnam became rice exporting
5 countries and there were a couple of things that Thieu did that were really significant.
6 One of them was actually in active land reform, sort of been stalled. That was particularly
7 helpful down in the Delta. I was sort of following this fairly keenly through people I
8 knew, it was impossible for me personally to let go of what was going on and of course I
9 was in touch with Lansdale and Lansdale was intimately in touch with what was
10 happening in Vietnam.

11 KC: What about the end of April in '75? If you remember or have seen the
12 footage of the chaos as the fall of Saigon was taking place. Did you watch this live? What
13 are your thoughts?

14 RP: Yeah, I watched some of it live of course. The helicopters taking off from the
15 roof of the embassy. And also, you say the picture says a thousand more things than
16 words. The picture of Lan executing this VC prisoner, while that was showing up and
17 everybody was deplored it as an example of South Vietnamese brutality. I was getting
18 information that this guy had actually not only was he an assassin, but he had
19 assassinated not just one of the aids, but also his entire family, men, women and children.
20 So, I had some understanding of why he would be absolutely enraged, of course that
21 didn't come through at all.

22 KC: Well, as we said before some of those photographs and the footage are just so
23 visceral looking at it. And as you mention—

24 RP: And the other thing that didn't get much cover was the assassination up in
25 Hue. Afterwards, that became a bone of contention for some writers who were so anti-
26 Vietnam War that they claim there was a mirage, it wasn't. Of course, I knew about that
27 too. I think one of the agonizing things really was I was getting direct information about
28 what was going on, on the ground that didn't conform with what people thought they
29 were seeing on the TV screen.

30 KC: Yeah. You mentioned trying to welcome the Vietnamese refugees to the
31 Fairfax County of Virginia, of course we know there are many Vietnamese that came to

1 that part of Virginia, that part of the country to settle in. What was the reception of the
2 Vietnamese initially when they moved into that part of the world?

3 RP: It was pretty good because there were enough Vietnamese already here who
4 had been say attached to the embassy, some were living here. They pretty quickly formed
5 associations to help settle the Vietnamese. There was some anti- reaction locally by other
6 merchants where the Vietnamese would open a center and it would become very
7 competitive. But in general, once it was explained what these people had gone through I
8 thought that the general attitude was pretty welcoming.

9 KC: Tell me about your career following Vietnam. Obviously, the Board there at
10 Fairfax County there was a run for Congress.

11 RP: There was a run for the nomination, and I lost that.

12 KC: Well, tell me about your career after the Vietnam War, Rufus. What sort of
13 things were you interested in?

14 RP: Well, one was that my father had died in October of '63. So, I had to come
15 back and take over this engineering firm. I had been working for him for a couple of
16 years before I volunteered and went back out to Vietnam in '62. There were a lot of—the
17 firm was mainly doing airport designs and consulting engineering and there were a
18 number of projects going on. I thought that maybe the firm was in fairly good shape and
19 my mother was dependent on some of the income coming out of the firm and she was
20 still living. So, I thought initially that I could come back, take the firm and sell it, but that
21 was not possible. It turned out that my father had not been that capable because he was
22 suffering from cancer for the last eight months of his life while I was in Vietnam, and he
23 hadn't told me that. So, a lot of these projects needed some leadership, so I got involved
24 in that and just turned out not possible for me to sell the firm, so I had to start running it.
25 If you are running something like that you need to get new projects and I got involved in
26 a very big one in Saudi Arabia, a new airport. We won that contract, but that required a
27 lot of time and attention. So, that was why I was able to go back out with Lansdale when
28 he went out in '65, but I did manage to give him a month every year to sort of help out.
29 So, I was running that firm and it was a small firm, but highly specialized. We were able
30 to compete with some of the giants for a fairly sizeable project. Most of them were
31 overseas and that took a fair amount of time and traveling. I was raising a family of four

1 by this time in McLean, Virginia; my wife Barbara was an interpreter, she came from
2 Chile originally. She was an interpreter, freelance, at the OAS at the State Department,
3 then eventually she became part of the Language Services Staff at State and interpreted
4 for three presidents among others. She was a diplomatic level interpreter, both
5 simultaneous and consecutive. So, I became very involved in life in McLean and I got
6 asked in the summer of '71, my wife had joined the Young Democrats and I got to know
7 some of that, and they sent a delegation over to my house. They asked me to run against
8 this supervisor who was not a republican, she was independent, but she made some real
9 mistakes. There was a fair amount of public sentiment against her, so I agreed to do that.
10 I had thought about when I was out in Vietnam that I am important to Washington, now I
11 am important to Congress and effecting US policy and how we operated abroad and
12 became very apparent to me that most Congressmen had no idea. And they didn't even
13 know what kind of questions to ask when they had people come in and tell them what
14 was going on in Vietnam or many other places for that matter. I had some political
15 ambitions and they had been furthered by a guy that I had met who was actually had been
16 the chairman of the Democratic Party in California than the chairman of the Democratic
17 Party in Northern California. I started talking to him about wanting to affect national
18 politics and he actually tried to persuade me to come out and move the whole family out
19 to Riverside and run for Congress in Sunny's old district. Sunny had been a congressman
20 and then he became a senator. He was a (inaudible), I thought about that, and it certainly
21 aroused my interest in elected politics, but I decided no, this is really crazy. So, I didn't
22 do that, but this was an opportunity to get into politics and I was interested in what was
23 going on in McLean at the time, so I got elected to the County Board of Supervisors and
24 then there was an opportunity to run against Joel Brohill who was an old time politician
25 and had been immersed in some scandals and was the representative from the fifth district
26 of what was then the fifth district in Northern Virginia. And I ran in the primary, but I
27 lost to another stateman from Arlington who just had total Arlington support and the
28 district included all of Arlington and part of Fairfax, which I was representing and went
29 out to Laudon County which is west up to Kreuger. I won those two counties but that
30 wasn't enough to overcome the other votes, so I lost to Joe Fisher and supported him and
31 then somehow and I don't know how this came about, I got interested in running for the

1 US Senate. And I launched a campaign, it was a convention, and I got a fair number of
2 delegates, but there was a candidate who had been attorney general and then run
3 unsuccessfully for the Governor's nomination and lost. He was favored by most of the
4 county, the county party and he won and that was my last brush with politics. Anyway, it
5 was an interesting adventure, let us put it that way.

6 KC: I would imagine that it was.

7 RP: Yeah.

8 KC: Well, what about your career post-politics?

9 RP: Well, I continued to run Airways and I eventually sold it to a guy and that
10 turned out to not be successful. I had to come back in as a consultant to keep the firm
11 operating and then I eventually retired from that, and Barbara retired from the State
12 Department. So, we had a wonderful time going on trips and enjoying life and along
13 came grandchildren.

14 KC: Well, tell me about—

15 RP: And here I am. And I lost her a year ago.

16 KC: Yes, yes, that is just about a year ago as I recall.

17 RP: Yes, February 11th.

18 KC: Tell me about your family. Tell me about your kids growing up what sort of
19 things did they do. What's it like to be a father?

20 RP: Well, we had four. We had three almost in a row and my mother became
21 alarmed I think to produce a family so big it was way beyond my ability to look after
22 them. First was the oldest son, who was Rufus IV who was born in 1961, we were
23 married in '60. Then came Annie a year later the Edward two and a half years later and
24 then Patty six years after that. So, she was the caboose, she was the result of—it wasn't a
25 result. Our daughter Anne was being picked on by the boys and she came to her mother
26 and said, "Mommy can you please give me a sister" and anyway we didn't plan it that
27 way, but it was kind of unbelievable that we had boy, girl, boy girl. So, they all went to
28 public school in the McLean area. Rufus and Edward went to the University of Virginia,
29 Anne went down to Emery. Patty started out in UW; she was a soccer star. She was the
30 goalie on this Northern Virginia team that won the regionals here and went to a
31 tournament up outside of Boston. Her team lost the team from Long Island that won the

1 Nationals. This is all sixteen and under, so she was going to play for GW, but she hurt her
2 ankle and she didn't much like GW. She had a friend out in Wisconsin, so she transferred
3 to Wisconsin and went there and was very happy with that. She then went to law school
4 at the University of Richmond and became a lawyer. Rufus went to business school at
5 Virginia Garden and worked at a corporation for a while that had—well he worked for
6 the State Government on exports and did a fair amount of traveling then he worked for a
7 company that manufactured cardboard cartons which you used to ship bottles and stuff.
8 So, he wound up going to Indonesia and all over the place. Eventually, he became
9 regional director of the Virginia Medical Society and now he's executive director of
10 Virginia Association of Free Clinics. So, he is in the middle of this whole COVID
11 pandemic, yeah. Then Anne started working for a communications company that
12 pioneered a lot of the wireless stuff and she became an expert in that whole stuff. She
13 married a guy from Baltimore, and they have two daughters; one daughter graduated
14 from John's Hopkins and is working for a law firm in New York, the other one is down
15 in Tulane. She is the executive director of an association of independent TV stations,
16 about a hundred and twenty of them in the United States which is a pretty big deal. She's
17 a bit like herding cats.

18 KC: I would imagine so.

19 RP: And then, let's see, Edward was always his own independent guy. He
20 graduated in English literature from Virginia and wound up being a very high priced
21 independent what you would call computer engineer. A programing engineer and he is
22 doing some very sophisticated stuff out in San Francisco; he went out west and stayed out
23 west. And then my youngest daughter, Patty, married a guy who is now the town
24 manager of Fall's Church which is a small city adjacent to Arlington County. She started
25 her own business as an independent contractor building green homes. I don't know how
26 the hell she did this, but she taught herself and passed the licensing exam for a class A
27 contractor in the state of Virginia.

28 KC: How about that.

29 RP: Yeah, so she has got her own contracting and they build green homes. And
30 they are building about I guess five a year. These are highly insulated, very sophisticated
31 houses that require almost no energy to run. Then she and her husband adopted two kids

1 from Colombia. One of them is temporarily out of school, would have been in
2 community college, the other is graduating from the high school there, he is wrestling
3 captain and also co-captain on the football team and he has been accepted to VMI and
4 will go this Fall.

5 KC: Outstanding.

6 RP: Yes.

7 KC: A lot of successful kids and grandkids it sounds like.

8 RP: Yeah. You know, I try not to brag too much about them.

9 KC: Well, you certainly have plenty to brag about I think.

10 RP: Well, you can't take credit. You just stand by and be proud.

11 KC: Sure, sure. Well, we have another topic to address Rufus. But like you
12 mentioned before we turned on the recorders, probably something served for one more
13 session. So, let's go ahead and stop there for today.

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Interview with Rufus Phillips
Session [14] of [14]
May 20, 2021

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Rufus Philips. Today is 20 May 2021, I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Philips is joining
3 me by telephone again from Arlington, Virginia. Rufus let's talk about your 2008 book,
4 specifically the last chapter. The book of course is *Why Vietnam Matters* and *Why*
5 *Vietnam Matters* in relation to some of the things we have been seeing in the first part of
6 the twenty first century are of the US efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Something of
7 course you have put a lot of time in. Also, you have another book coming out the
8 *University of Kansas Press* for too long on *Fragile States*. So, tell me about *Why Vietnam*
9 *matters* to what we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan.

10 Rufus Philips: Well, it matters because we made a lot of errors in dealing with
11 Vietnam and those were not I don't think widely recognized. In other words, we had a
12 situation in which the notion was that we were going to win the war by convincing them
13 and the troops were going to come home, and we were going to turn the country back to
14 the Vietnamese. On the ground, there was a significant effort to try to help Vietnamese
15 develop and defend themselves and that was of the organization CHORDS. That was a
16 combination of civilian and military advisors and that worked, but in the meantime the
17 war was lost at home and in the minds of the American people because it had been casted
18 in conventional terms and obviously in conventional terms we weren't winning. So, the
19 political side of the war was misunderstood or not understood. The Vietnamese and the
20 Americans were ships passing in the night and didn't understand each other. So, we got
21 part of it right out in Vietnam with CHORDS and that approach to pacification working
22 from the ground up. But then the conventional war part of it which was basically what
23 was showed to the American people turned out to be wrong and not workable. So, what I
24 saw in Iraq and Afghanistan was initially some of the same kind of approach that we
25 were going to go in and defeat not Al Qaeda, but Hussein. We were going to defeat
26 Hussein and establish a kind of controlled unit that would really run from the American
27 side s setting up a new democracy in which the Iraqis were clearly not in control of much
28 of anything. We were just out of touch to what was going on. We initially defeated the
29 Iraqi Army, but granted we failed to support them and use them and that turned them

1 against us; all of the folks that had to go home and went home with a weapon and weren't
2 paid. So, we created a problem for ourselves by not understanding that we had to work
3 with the Iraqis and through the Iraqis to stabilize the country if you were going to remove
4 the government. And then we went into Afghanistan and of course we chased the Taliban
5 out of the country, but we confused the Taliban with Al Qaeda. And we started treating
6 the Taliban exactly like the same way as if they were all terrorists. So, they were subject
7 to all kinds of mistreatment. And this became a cause on their side that we didn't
8 understand, the other thing was that the heartland was in the south and after the initial
9 victory, tension was diverted to Iraq, resources were removed from Afghanistan despite
10 the cleaning up of our local representatives could see what was going on and we let the
11 political acumen out, which the Taliban naturally came back and filled. By 2008 it was
12 apparent to me that in a way—it was apparent already that we were sort of fighting the
13 Afghan War on the basis one war at a time and changing leadership all the time, changing
14 units all the time, no continuity, et cetera. And then of course in 2009 I went out and that
15 was after the book if you want me to talk about that.

16 KC: Sure.

17 RP: That experience. Yeah. After the book was published one of the people that
18 was really interested in it and sort of boosted was McMaster. As soon as Obama came in,
19 the SINCOM charged McMaster with convening a study group to come up with a new
20 policy in regard to how to deal with Afghanistan. And so, McMaster invited me down
21 and then McMaster that I think was pretty unusual; he convened a group not just of
22 military folks, but of civilians including some foreigners as a kind of sounding board to
23 start working on the notion of a new strategy for Afghanistan. And he invited me to come
24 down there and talk to them about Vietnam. Well, that aroused the interest of several of
25 the people who were civilians and they got me involved in a planning exercise back here.
26 There was—I can't remember all the names—Claire Lockhart who had been one of the
27 leading UN representatives to standing up to the Afghan Government was back here and
28 she was the head of this foundation. She talked about fixing the failed state, about really
29 fixing the failed state. So, she got me involved in these meetings and as a result of that I
30 got interested in going out to Afghanistan. An opportunity arose where the Fair and Free
31 Foundation of Elections Afghanistan would sort of welcome some English-speaking

1 advisors. So, they asked me if I would be willing to come and I said I would. I actually
2 paid my own way out there and they paired me with a car and driver when I got there and
3 an office building. So, I got involved in all of their pre-elections activities where they
4 were feeling a whole bunch of election observes in the provinces. And I saw a young
5 woman coming in being trained from the provinces to go back and recruit additional
6 election observers in the provinces. And one of them was a young woman who didn't
7 have anybody to take care of her baby, so I was on the top floor which was cooler than
8 the bottom floor because it was open to the breeze; it was pretty hot time in Afghanistan
9 which was the end of July and August. She didn't speak much English; she came up and
10 sort of with hand signals asked me if she could keep her baby there while she was being
11 trained downstairs. So, I said sure and then at the end of the day she would come up and
12 get her baby and I wrote my wife at the time. I sent her an email saying, "I know I am
13 here in Afghanistan trying to help these people." I got pretty emotionally involved in
14 trying to help the election foundation. Unfortunately, Kolbrook came out just as I was
15 arriving, so I got invited to his initial reception at the embassy and he gave a little talk,
16 but then he signaled me out and said what a tremendous thing it was that I volunteered to
17 come out and help the Afghans and so forth and so on. He seated me at his table. What I
18 didn't realize was he was working actively to try to recruit candidates to run against
19 Karzai. So, he became the number one enemy of Karzai. The fact that here I was, this
20 advisor to this nonprofit that was neutral, aroused a lot of suspicion, in the last couple of
21 weeks of the political taping. They asked me to stay away from the office, so apparently I
22 had run into a person who knew me from earlier. She was from the embassy, and she was
23 in charge of developing the civilian side. So, she invited me to come down and talk to the
24 planning group and also had me comment on a version of their plan which they declared
25 to be unclassified. I was reviewing their plan and critiquing their plan and was
26 immediately back in counterinsurgency on a pro-bono basis. I think I was helpful to
27 them, but I saw all of the problems up pretty close. First of all, the embassy was supposed
28 to uphold the rules that the Afghans had prorogated for themselves on the election, but
29 they refused to interfere in any way. So, the US influence over some of the illegal stuff
30 that Kazai campaigned, they could have stopped in their tracks. I mean, we had a
31 commission under the UN, and we had a guy on it. There was just no action. And then

1 when I went over and looked at the plan I found that there were already a few people out
2 in the provinces who were civilians. But the idea was to put this massive amount of
3 people out in the provinces, and it will be recruited from all over the place with
4 absolutely no experience in Afghanistan or counterinsurgency or anything like that. So,
5 you had people coming from Japan, can you imagine service in the embassy in Japan
6 preparing you for being out in the countryside in the middle of an insurgency in
7 Afghanistan?

8 KC: Just warm bodies I guess.

9 RP: Yeah and the whole thing was a numbers deal. And people were anxious to
10 spent money that had been appropriated regardless of whether they had stuff to spend it
11 on or not. And then we had already set up our own bases and they were so far removed
12 from the Afghan situation. There was a base in Cabo that I know was serving twenty five
13 flavors of ice cream. There was just a mismatch between the American side and the
14 Afghan side. So, one of the things that Richard asked me to do when I saw him briefly
15 was to talk to the ambassador about counterinsurgency, he doesn't understand it. He must
16 have said something to Isenberg, anyway, luncheon was arranged but then got cancelled,
17 so I then went down to see him. And I expected there would be some discussion of
18 counterinsurgency and instead he spent the whole time complaining about Karzai and
19 what a terrible guy Karzai was. So, he became persona non grata with Karzai. We kept
20 him there, there were people in Washington who said, "well we'll show them." Then I
21 got the note from some of the people who were really out in the provinces who were
22 doing constructive things, but there was just no strategy and no real plan that could form
23 with reality, and we were putting in the troops, but we didn't have a transition plan. So, I
24 could see this kind of happening on the ground and came back with some hope just
25 because Afghans were trying to make a democracy and believed in it and women were
26 improving their status. There was some hope there, but I didn't see that we were really
27 connected with reality out there and you see that now with a lot of the post-action report.
28 You've got the *New York Times* with this series about Afghanistan and apparently the
29 main author of that has put it all into a book which is going to be released. So, I sort of
30 worry about the fact that this situation is going to be Vietnam redux in which the
31 argument is about who lost Afghanistan and well we were lied to. I am concerned about

1 that kind of poisoning the atmosphere for any real examination of why we were not
2 successful in Afghanistan. This is probably more than you want.

3 KC: No, it's not. It's fascinating stuff from this perspective. From the early days
4 in the mid-1950s up to today this is obviously still relevant. I've got a question for you
5 here talking about your book or since your book obviously published in 2008. What have
6 you seen in either Iraq or Afghanistan or both of them, preferably both of them, that has
7 surprised you that time? And what sort of things are you still convinced that you wrote in
8 2008 apply today?

9 RP: Well, one of the things that surprised me was is the ability of some of our
10 people on the ground to learn from the circumstances and instead of treating civilians as
11 the enemy, they started changing the psychology and people were in charge of units that
12 were going into situations in the outskirts of Bagdad where there was terrible violence.
13 And instead of reacting against having—they'd have some of their own guys killed and
14 instead of reacting against the civilian population, they were able to work with the
15 civilian population to turn the situation around in which there was teamwork in setting
16 things up so the people there could defend themselves. And then in Afghanistan I ran
17 across all kinds of initiatives conducted by people in the ground that just made a hell of a
18 lot of sense. There was one unit, the Wolf Hounds, I have forgotten the number of the
19 regiment, but they had a colonel whose motto was the truth before they ever went over
20 there, and he did a lot of indoctrination of them. They were assigned to pick a province
21 and he said, "we're going to win a province without taking a shot." Well, how's that for
22 psychology. And of course, they had to fire some shots, but they started working with the
23 Afghans and they helped set up self-defense and were working with the village councils.
24 It was just a totally different kind of thing. And they helped really establish security in
25 the province. The story was, which is really interesting, is that the unit they replaced was
26 really depressed and upset because their mission was kill Taliban. They were in fire
27 fights all the time, so in comes this different approach and then after that unit one year
28 later is replaced by another unit who is very skeptical, "what do you mean not fire a shot?
29 We are here to kill Taliban's." It is just an example of the war being fought one year at a
30 time in one particular province. That was kind of the prevailing thing, and we never got
31 the mission straight that we were there to help the Afghans defend themselves and the

1 test would be if we could help train and support them in taking over their own country.
2 So, that to me is the basic lesson from Vietnam.

3 KC: Well, this patient long-term approach to persevere, maybe that is the most
4 important thing in these kinds of circumstances to try to like you said, both in Vietnam
5 through the 1960s and here in the states today Iraq and Afghanistan. This long-term
6 approach it takes a very, very long time for that and the US patience for these kinds of
7 things, we don't have a terribly good record of being patient in this kind of long-term
8 thing.

9 RP: Yeah, we just think we can come in there, cure the problem in a reasonably
10 short time ourselves and turn the country back over to the inhabitants. And that is not
11 what would work, what we were there for was to try to help the country become stable
12 itself and able to defend itself to a reasonable degree. That didn't mean you had to kill
13 every last Taliban in these kinds of war typically tend to get down to a political
14 negotiation at the end, but it is a political negotiation in which the government—if the
15 outcome if successful the government sort of has to repair. Well, as several people have
16 pointed out, at the beginning of this Afghanistan had no government, no schools, no
17 army, no nothing. To try to build something up from that complete vacuum, anybody
18 would have thought this is one hell of a job and it is going to take a long time in a country
19 that has its own ethnic divisions and so forth and so on. So, we are going to be serious
20 about this effort, we are here for the long haul.

21 KC: Should we though? Is it worth it though if we can't see success in the time
22 frame that we set out for ourselves, even an expanded time frame?

23 RP: Yes. I mean how do you expect these problems to cure themselves? I mean,
24 these countries fall into chaos in which terrorists have kind of a free reign or base.
25 Sometimes they can overthrow the government and that does represent a national security
26 threat and if not directly to us sometimes, then to our allies. I mean look at what
27 happened in Syria, all these Syrian refugees came pouring out and they wound up calling
28 up Brexit in England. There are a lot of interconnected stuff here and we need to see our
29 security sometimes in a larger sense. But this maintaining of a relatively small force
30 mainly of advisors and some technical support including mainly aircraft while we build
31 up a local air force; we never did that for the Afghans. We still are leaving them

1 dependent on maintenance support. Now it appears that not only are our forces pulling
2 out, but the maintenance support. To me, if we are going to be involved in the world, or
3 at least that part, and we don't think we can just wall all of that off then we need to make
4 this serious and long-term effort. It doesn't have to involve thousands of troops; it
5 involves a relatively small number of folks who know what the hell they are doing, and
6 the Special Forces have been especially effected by this. But to a certain extent they have
7 been the burden with their mission of killing terrorists and mowing the grass. So, this is
8 lower in status, but that used to be one of their jobs. And to the extent that they got
9 involved in helping start the local police program for example in Afghanistan they were
10 effective at it. My feeling is that we're just politically disconnected to what we are doing,
11 and it doesn't make sense in local terms. Nobody is explaining to the American people
12 either, that is another thing. I don't want to brag about myself, but you give me an hour
13 and I will go out to any god damn town or city and convene a bunch of citizens and sit
14 down and try to explain this to them and I think they are going to recognize what the hell
15 I am saying. But nobody wanted to do that from the president on down. You have to get
16 people to understand what kind of contest you are in and if you don't understand the war
17 you are in than you are not going to be successful at it.

18 KC: Well, you talked about the lack of continuity and the way the war was being
19 fought or the process was working out militarily in that one province. What about when
20 you draw back and look at an even larger picture in terms of American politics? What
21 kind of role effect does American politics at the highest level have on what's going on in
22 these two regions? When we go to President Bush to President Obama to President
23 Trump to now President Biden; what kind of effect does that have?

24 RP: Well, the election cycle certainly has an influence and when you establish
25 that you are going to achieve success within a relatively short period of time and put that
26 our there then you are vulnerable. So, it is either succeed or withdraw. Of course, it is
27 influenced by local politics, but you have to start with the thought that you have to
28 explain what it is you are doing and why you are doing it. What the relevance is and how
29 to measure success from the very beginning rather than going from goal that we have
30 apparently (inaudible) right now, but let's make a bunch of trips out there and by God
31 they'll take care of it in the short term and then we can bring the troops home. So, that

1 gets embedded in the mind of the American public and the election cycles are coming up
2 and if you don't achieve it within a short term you are judged on that basis.

3 KC: What about the role of Congressman in all of this, US Congress?

4 RP: Well, they got a leadership role too. In the sense they are trying to understand
5 what this is about, and I had a crazy idea for somebody to take the initiative over town
6 halls around the country to try to explain what this kind of war is about. So, the common
7 sense terms. How would you measure success, and didn't you say what you are really
8 measuring success by is whether the country in question can eventually progress to a
9 point where it can control if not totally defeat these kind of internal contests. And our role
10 is to help them do that. This is the way that we should try to establish security among all
11 these developing countries, and we should understand and have the patience to do this.
12 It's I guess the word would be you frame a different paradigm.

13 KC: Tell me about this new book that you're wrapping up. What's the title and
14 what are you talking about there?

15 RP: Well, the title is *Stabilizing Fragile State Matters: Only they can do it, but we*
16 *can help*. What it does is try to explain where I am coming from that the book's objective
17 is to try to put forth a strategy that would work in helping stabilize fragile states. I am
18 recognizing that the Global Fragility Act was passed by Congress in 2009 and proposes
19 to improve the way we are dealing with fragile states and there have been meetings and
20 coordination on the government side. The role of meeting it has been given to the State
21 Department, but the State Department doesn't possess the kind of force that can actually
22 be effective in this. So, I proposed setting up a corps expeditionary diplomats and
23 development personnel because aid has the main job on the economic and political side.
24 And positioning them in an embassy, hopefully with a good leadership, to work
25 cooperatively, engender the trust on the part of the locals, and develop a strategic plan, a
26 strategy and a plan for stabilizing the country. That is not just the American plan, but it
27 has really bought into by the local leadership. Then we help them with a minor number of
28 people and a minor amount of money to implement this. I think at least this is a proposal.
29 Interestingly, I came up with this proposal several years ago and it got some interest
30 inside of State and the planning group inside of State that was preparing for this annual
31 review, diplomatic and development review that State sort of adopted from the Defense

1 Department. There was actually a pilot project proposed, that set up this kind of corps,
2 but it failed for bureaucratic reasons. What I am doing I guess resuming the notion that
3 yes we can do this. We can do it at a relatively low cost, but we need to have the people
4 who are equipped to do it and we need to understand that they need to stay in a country
5 long enough to not be rotated out every year to not only establish these relationships of
6 trust, but then be able to work in support of the people in the local government who are
7 implementing this strategy. That's I guess there's an analysis of the Cold War examples,
8 a little bit of Vietnam and then El Salvador. But the real focus is on Iraq, Colombia, and
9 Afghanistan. Of course, Colombia is an outstanding example, they got a hell of a lot of
10 problems with just this history of violence in Colombia. But they really defeated the
11 frock which was really at one point was very close to taking over the country. A lot of it
12 was political in terms of the leadership inside of the country actually going out and
13 meeting with local town and city councils and supplying support on a decentralized basis
14 rather than a centralized government which a lot of the Latin American governments are.
15 This became a decentralized effort which largely succeeded because the people got
16 involved in defending themselves and in self-development. It proved to be a successful
17 approach because it took away from the farce. So, it's not that this cannot be done, it's a
18 difficult job. It's really hard, but you are only going to achieve some success if you
19 persist.

20 KC: What do you see as the major challenges for the US strategically moving
21 forward?

22 RP: Obviously, there is the whole big power competition thing. There is a
23 technological challenge because of the advances that are being made in weaponry which
24 we need to meet. So, there is that. It is conventional in one sense, and it involves major
25 forces in a more technological, but still maybe traditional form of warfare. But at the
26 same time, we've got this other problem that we simply can't ignore which is fragile
27 states failing because they don't have a strategy themselves and they are not getting
28 effective support. It is very interesting even the world bank has recognized that a lot of
29 the development support is failing because of political fragility. So, they have come out
30 with their own assessment of this trying to refocus bank efforts on the political as well as
31 the economic development side. So, there is an opportunity there to be more effective. It

1 is not to say that everything is going to succeed, but I think a larger success covering
2 more countries is feasible and possible. And I guess that goes back all the way to the
3 early days in Vietnam when nobody gave South Vietnam a chance of surviving except for
4 Lansdale and his crew. The story wasn't just Diem conquering all, there were a lot of deft
5 political moves and Lansdale had a strategy and he had a sense of what was needed.
6 Diem listened to him on a lot of stuff, we got somewhat off base on the political side with
7 the support of the Can Lao and the personal party for Diem which he opposed. But still it
8 was a lesson in how you could turn things around in the country. You really needed to get
9 Americans involved in way over on the Vietnamese side. My feeling was we were all
10 brothers in this conflict and then this is just a different feeling from the US over here and
11 the Vietnamese over there or the Afghans over there or the Iraqis over there or whoever's
12 over there. I don't know. I get worked up (both laughing).

13 KC: Well, that's to your own advantage. Let me ask you this pretty bluntly; do
14 you think we will do it?

15 RP: I don't know. The tendency right now—a lot depends on what happens with
16 Afghanistan I guess. Did it turn around and bite us? There are still other fragile states and
17 there is still this Fragility Act which is in process of implementation whether the Biden
18 Administration is preoccupied by so many other things will give it some support. It is
19 hard to say, but I can guarantee you that if we don't address this problem it is going to
20 turn around and bite us sometime in the future. And all of a sudden we are going to wake
21 up and say, "well why haven't we been doing that."

22 KC: Well, Rufus I think that covers it for me. Is there anything else you'd like to
23 add?

24 RP: No, I was reminded of what was it Churchill saying about the United States?
25 "We try everything (laughing) else until we find the right approach."

26 KC: You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing after they have
27 exhausted all other possibilities. Something like that.

28 RP: Exactly.

29 KC: Alright, well Rufus this has been an absolute pleasure and I appreciate the
30 time and effort you put into this.

1 RP: It's a pleasure to leave behind whatever I can for people to have a chance to
2 read it and see if it makes any sense. I can't ask for any more than that.

3 KC: I think that is a very well put and it's obviously an incredibly useful and
4 interesting exercise we were lucky to participate in here, so I want to thank you again for
5 everything you put into this.

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