

INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 4, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: RUFUS PHILLIPS

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Phillips' office, Arlington, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1

G: First of all, Mr. Phillips, would you give us some background? What were the circumstances of your entry into government service?

P: In 1952, I was in law school in the University of Virginia. I had been approached by the CIA when I was at Yale to go to work for them but I decided to go to law school. And I went to law school and got bored, because this was the middle of the Korean War and I had friends who were involved in it and I didn't feel very good, frankly, about staying in law school. So I got out and I joined the agency briefly, and I was supposed to be sent to a project in Germany, which was a big training program for emigrés from [the communist] bloc, who were then to be sent back in the bloc. If you remember that time, this was during the Korean War and there was an expectation, or if not an expectation, at least some anxiety that the Russians might do something in Europe. So there were a lot of people being trained there.

Well, this particular operation got blown, and I didn't have anything to do in the agency, so I got out of the agency, volunteered for the U.S. Army, was inducted at Fort Meade, went up to Indiantown Gap, took my basic training, volunteered for OCS, went to [Fort]

Benning, went through OCS, graduated, went to jump school, and then was assigned to Korea.

In my MOS [Military Occupation Specialty], I put the fact that I spoke French, which I did to some degree. I'd taken it in college and I'd been to France and I did have some French language. It was in early 1954 when I was assigned to Korea. I went through basic training and OCS in 1953, and jump school, and at the end of 1953 I was sent to Korea. So in 1954, in July, I received notification that the army wanted to transfer me to Vietnam. What happened was in the Far East they went around looking for people that had some French in their background, because according to the Geneva Accords, a limit was to go on the introduction of any foreign personnel, additional military personnel, in Indochina, on I think it was August 12. They were looking to try to introduce additional people into the military advisory mission just to get the limit up, not sure of what they were going to do or how they were going to utilize them. So I was one of those who got tapped, and I didn't even know where Vietnam was.

I got sent down to Vietnam and arrived there, was put up in the Majestic Hotel with a whole bunch of other guys who were also assigned there, who didn't really have anything to do. We were just kind of milling around, trying to figure out what South Vietnam was all about. Then some of us got assigned to help with the refugees coming down, because there were a lot of refugees. I got assigned to a division that was created in MAAG by a guy named Ed Lansdale, whom I'm sure you know all about, which was called the Saigon Military Mission. And in effect, I was reassigned, but as a legitimate military officer, to this CIA

mission, which was a special CIA mission there. Ed really had kind of a joint responsibility from both the Defense Department and CIA and the State Department to try to do something to save South Vietnam. I was a green second lieutenant at this point, and I didn't know anything about Vietnam, or about saving Vietnam. (Laughter)

G: I was about to ask a fairly obvious question: did you know anything about Colonel Lansdale at that time?

P: No. Never heard of him.

G: You had no insight into his Philippine exploits?

P: No. At that point, no.

G: Okay. Please excuse me. Go ahead.

P: Well, it was a very interesting experience, because for a time he had these people who were assigned to him, and he didn't know what to do with them either, because there was just a tremendous amount of confusion in Vietnam at this time. I mean, you had all these refugees coming south; I remember going over to his house one evening, trying to nail down exactly what it was that he wanted me to do, and here were a whole bunch of excited Vietnamese who were jumping up and down and gesticulating. A lot of them were Vietnamese Catholics from the North who were asking the Americans to arm them so that they could go after the French, because the French had just evacuated all of the Catholic zones in the North without giving anybody any warning, and in came the Viet Minh. That was one of the reasons why all of these refugees suddenly appeared. But they felt that they had been stabbed in the back by the French. This is to give you an idea of the kind of confusion.

I asked Colonel Lansdale what it was he wanted me to do, and he kind of put me off, and put me off, and finally he said, "There's a psywar staff, a G-5 that's attached to the Vietnamese army general staff, a guy named [Pham Xuan] Giai who heads it, and I want you to go out and get to know these people and see if there's anything you can do to help them." And I said, "Well, what do they do?" He said, "Well, they have a dual mission. They're supposed to carry out the psychological warfare operations of the Vietnamese army, and they're also supposed to carry out troop indoctrination and training. I've talked to them before; they also have a psywar company that's headed by a Captain Duc, and they need some training. They really do. Maybe you can advise them and help them, because as I see it, fairly soon the Vietnamese government in the South is going to have to go in and try to reoccupy all these areas that are being evacuated by the Viet Minh, and right now they don't have any organization, they don't have any idea what they're supposed to be doing."

So I went out there, and I introduced myself to Captain Giai, who had been trained at Fort Bragg, by the way, and--

G: Is that G-I-A-I?

P: G-I-A-I, yes. And he had a Captain Manh who was an assistant to him--a very nice fellow--and I've forgotten, another lieutenant who ran the radio station, Lieutenant Minh. All these guys had been together--no, two of them, the lieutenant and Captain Giai, had been at Fort Bragg. I went out there and I had a hard time getting these people to really talk to me about much of anything, but I was there.

G: Did you use French or English?

P: Well, I used some French; my French was developing. You know, I was working on it but it wasn't as fluent as it really should have been, and so I used a combination of French and English. Some of them spoke some English, but there were very few people in the Vietnamese army, or in fact in Vietnam at this time, that spoke any English, so it was kind of almost sink or swim in French.

I went out, and I got to know the psywar company, and they asked me to help them develop a course to train their people, and I said sure. Then I came back to General Lansdale and said, "What do I do now? I'm no expert on psywar." (Laughter)

G: I was about to ask--

P: And he said, "Well, here's Paul Linebarger's book on it [*Psychological Warfare*]. Read it and then try to figure out how you might apply something to the Vietnamese situation."

So I studied that, and I started working with the psywar company. I didn't get very far with Giaï, because it turned out that he was up to his eyeballs in planning and helping General Hinh organize this attempted coup against Diem.

One of the other things that I did was, there was a Philippine colonel there who was a military attaché, who was President [Ramon] Magsaysay's wife's brother, a guy named Joe Banzon, who was very close to the Vietnamese military and had a good idea of the kinds of things that they really ought to be doing. We arranged to get invited on a trip out in the countryside, just to see what the Vietnamese government was doing in some of these areas which were being evacuated by the Viet Minh in the South.

There was an area called Long My, which was in Soc Trang province, where the Viet Minh had left and the Vietnamese army had moved in. So we visited that area; it took us at least half a day, traveling on boats, by canals and everything, to get there. And there were no bridges; the Viet Minh had blown all the bridges. It was pretty inaccessible. When we got there we found a district chief who was a military--I think he was a captain, who was really [a] very thoughtful, sound person. And we found that he was out there; he was trying to do something positive, but he had no backup whatsoever from the Vietnamese army or government. The people needed mosquito netting; they needed some kind of medical help. This zone had been a war zone and it really was in bad shape. He had no information program and no information about the Vietnamese government, about Diem, about anything.

So Joe and I wrote up a report and we brought it back to Ed, and he passed it on to the Vietnamese army and Diem to try to get something organized. We did get them to drop some supplies out there, some mosquito netting and soap and blankets and stuff like that, that people needed, because this--I'm trying to recall when this was--this was about October, I guess, in 1954.

He also introduced me to a guy named Hanh [?], who ran the Ministry of Social Action program which had been working with the neighborhoods in Saigon, trying to get self-help programs started.

G: Is that H-A-N-H?

P: H-A-N-H. So through me [there] began to build up a series of contacts in the Vietnamese government who were very interested in trying to develop some plan to get the government organized and on its feet, and

dealing with the situation of how were they going to reoccupy all of this vast amount of territory in South Vietnam that the Viet Minh were evacuating, according to the Geneva Accords, and trying to establish some government there.

The idea was generated that maybe, if Diem was agreeable, that we'd try to take some people from the army and from the civilian side of the government over to the Philippines, and let them see what Magsaysay had done there, in a very positive sense, in combatting the Huks and re-establishing government and so forth. So a trip was laid on for, I think it was November. And we had some guys from the army, some from psywar, a couple of civilians, including a young guy who'd been to Michigan State [University], Nguyen Thanh, who was working in the office of the presidency, and Hanh, who was in charge of the social action program, we put them all together, and I went over as their escort officer.

It was a real learning experience for me, because I really didn't know anything about what was going on in the Philippines. I'd heard a lot from Joe Banzon, of course, and I was beginning to understand something. But it was a real eye opener, because we got the red-carpet treatment. These guys were taken over to the palace and had breakfast with Magsaysay--I've got a photograph of myself with the group with Magsaysay. They went out and they saw the whole thing. They saw civic action, how the troops handled themselves with the civilian population. They showed [them] the resettlement programs with the ex-Huk guerrillas. They saw everything that the Philippine government was doing, and I think it generated a lot of ideas. They came back; they gave a very

optimistic report to President Diem. The thrust of the report was, "Look, we have to get organized in the government, and maybe the best thing to do is assign this responsibility to the army to organize what might be called pacification of these areas, but it's really re-establishing the government in these areas."

So Diem liked this and assigned the responsibility to some staff people out in the general staff, to work on this, along with some people from his own staff, and I was assigned to work with them, to develop a pacification plan and sort of a program of how do you organize teams of army and civilians, and what would the army do, how would it handle itself, and so forth.

About this time, the American ambassador who'd been in Vietnam for a long time when the French were there, whose name was [Donald] Heath, was replaced by J. Lawton Collins. Collins came in there like a house afire and wanted to know what sort of positive things were we doing. Well, by that time we'd worked up this idea of pacification, so Ed presented it to him. Well, he bought it right away and said, "Oh, you know, we'll get full American support for this idea if the Vietnamese agree." So I sat around a couple of nights running with the Vietnamese; we wrote up this whole thing. And we took the Philippine experience; we took some of the early French experience in Vietnam, including something called the GAMS, which was the *Groupes*--I've forgotten what [the] A stands for now, but--*Groupes d'Action Mobiles*, which were teams that the French trained and used, Vietnamese teams that went in and worked in areas where the French army would go in along with the Vietnamese army and then they would try to leave government behind.



There was some really good stuff in there about how to do this kind of thing. So we tried to pull it all together and come up with this program, and we, that is, the Americans working with the Vietnamese, developed into the first sort of operation, call it a pacification operation. A national security directive was set up as the framework for this thing, and army units were assigned to go in and reoccupy the southern tip of the country, which was Ca Mau. This one psywar company that they had was assigned to do propaganda, and a staging area was set up in Soc Trang, which was north of Ca Mau, and I was sent down there as a liaison officer with them. We had an American colonel and a major and myself. I worked mainly with the psywar company.

Then when the Vietnamese were ready and they went in the zone, they did not want very many Americans hanging around, and since I was the lowest ranked, although not terribly inconspicuous in terms of size, they got in touch with Lansdale and said, "We'll take one person, we'll take Phillips with us, but nobody else."

G: Did the people think you were a Frenchman?

P: Well, this is one of the--yes, in some areas. So I went in with them down to Ca Mau, which was--boy, that was a rough ride, I'll tell you. The Viet Cong--then [they] were the Viet Minh--had just cut the roads into ribbons.

One of the things that I was also doing was trying to look out for a Filipino-manned medical operation called Operation Brotherhood, that had been invited into South Vietnam to take care of the refugees. They had agreed to send a medical team into this area, because it was known that the area had been under Viet Minh rule for nine years, had no

medical supplies, obviously had very, very serious medical problems. I had a radio with me and an independent means of communications to MAAG, so I was calling for them to get medical supplies, too. I was there as kind of a supernumerary, really; I worked with a guy named Colonel [Duong Van] Duc, who was the head of the whole operation. He took me around with him from time to time, and then I worked trying to help Operation Brotherhood. I lived off of *balut* and rice for about a week--

G: Would you spell that for us?

P: Do you know what *balut* is?

G: Yes, I do, but the transcriber may not.

(Laughter)

P: Well, it's a duck embryo that's developed along quite a bit, and then you hard-boil it and eat it.

G: Could you spell that?

P: I don't know. That's the Filipino word for it.

G: We'll look it up.

P: [There are two things] that I remember particularly well from this visit, or this assignment. One is the tremendous spirit that the Filipinos had and how they adapted to really very primitive conditions. They had to perform operations at night with no electric power, and I remember they brought in this one woman who had to have a Caesarean or she was going to die. So they put her up on a table and gave her a local anesthetic only, and I was one of the guys holding the flash light; you know, there were three flashlights and that was it.

G: That's about as basic as you can get.

P: That's about as basic as you can get. And she was fine; she survived, the baby was fine, and it was really something.

The other thing that I remember is that Colonel Duc decided to make a trip all the way down to the tip of Ca Mau, to a village that had been repeatedly bombed by the French and was the heart of Viet Minh resistance. It was an area which manufactured charcoal--that was their only industry--out of mangrove; the whole area is mangrove swamps. I asked him something about the area, but nobody knew anything, nobody briefed me, really told me anything, so I took off with them. We left early in the morning. It was hot and so I dressed in shorts and short-sleeved shirt.

We finally got down towards this one big village at the tip of Ca Mau about dusk, and I'm seeing the village; you could see where some smoke was, and it was about three or four miles away, and there were these tremendous mangrove swamps. By that time the canals had opened up and were very, very wide, and I see this cloud coming out of the mangroves. I said, "I wonder what that is." Well, what it was were mosquitoes. And when we landed, those mosquitoes jumped on us like something I have never seen in my life. Literally, they were so thick you could cut a swath through them with your hand. So everybody was waving handkerchiefs or whatever they had to try to get these mosquitoes off of them.

We landed, and nobody explained much about who I was or anything else. We all congregated over at kind of a little--you could call it a cafe, it was really a shack, where they served tea. And we sat down around this table. They put a smoke pot under the table to keep the

mosquitoes away. Well, you could hardly see, and you were choking because of the smoke, but that was better than being eaten alive by the mosquitoes.

I looked around and there's this crowd gathering. It gets bigger and bigger and bigger, and I hear all this undertone [makes droning noise], and it gets louder and louder. I get to feeling a little uneasy, you know, because I look at people's eyes and they don't look friendly. And I said, "What's going on?" They said, "Well, we'll find out." And one of them goes out; he comes back and says, "Oh, they think you're French." And I said, "Well, for Pete's sake, tell them I'm not, tell them I'm an American." They were ready to eat me alive, because the French had bombed this place.

He got up and made an announcement, and it's dead quiet. And everybody was very nice afterwards. I remember they brought us some food, some soup and stuff to eat, some noodles, and they'd set up some cots with mosquito nets, which we'd brought with us, because these poor folks had no mosquito nets down there. How in the hell they survived those mosquitoes, I'll never know. We ran from where we were and jumped in these cots and pulled the mosquito nets around us, and then with a flashlight, you know, you swatted the ones that had gotten on the inside and tried to go to sleep. And it was like sleeping on top of an electric dynamo, because these mosquitoes would come up underneath the cot and try to get through the canvas, and the hum was so loud--I mean, it was almost deafening.

G: That's incredible.

P: I mean, they were really--you felt like, boy, they were a bunch of tigers that were just ready to eat you alive. And of course, in the morning they all disappeared, they went back to the swamp.

Well, that's the other thing that I remember about Ca Mau.

(Laughter)

G: Among the medical supplies, you requested repellent and mosquito netting, I'm sure.

P: Yes. Well, next time I didn't go into an area like that in any shorts and short-sleeved shirts, either.

G: That's the area where the U Minh Forest was, wasn't it?

P: Yes.

G: Did you see any of that?

P: Yes. Well, I went by it, and that's of course where they had had very, very strong resistance. And there was some evidence then that they had left a number of people behind.

G: There was some evidence of that?

P: Yes. And there were some things, some propaganda they'd left behind, you know, "Resist forever," "Don't let the government take you over," "We will return" kind of stuff.

The interesting thing about the operation was that the Vietnamese army really wasn't very ready for this. There were some incidents where the troops did not behave very well. They did not have any information, you know, propaganda of any kind about the government ready to hand out. They were, in short, unprepared. So there were a number of lessons learned out of that particular operation, which when they had finished the occupation, I was called back to Saigon to write up these lessons

and get together with the Vietnamese army people to discuss the next operation they had on tap, which was the reoccupation of Interzone 5, in central Vietnam.

G: That's the Viet Minh designation?

P: That's right. That was the area which they had held up there for--the French had penetrated it only once, in Operation Atlante, and they'd stayed in for about thirty or sixty days and then been obliged to withdraw.

G: Is this on the coast?

P: Yes, this is the provinces of Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh. There was a Vietnamese colonel named Le Van Kim who was assigned to head up this operation. He and I got along very well right from the start. He was very smart, I mean really intelligent, and he was very interested in my observations from what I had seen in the South. So we developed together a program for indoctrinating the army, and he was assigned two divisions to carry out this operation. We set up an indoctrination program of over a month's duration to indoctrinate these troops in terms of how to deal with the civilian population, you know, a lesson in courtesy, and that you're there to help the people. And all this was just drilled and drilled and drilled into these guys.

Then I was assigned to go with them on this operation. I think Ed has this story in his book [*In the Midst of Wars*], which is absolutely true, that the Vietnamese asked for me, and there were some--we were in a joint military mission with the French, in TRIM [Training Relations Instruction Mission], and the particular section that we were involved in had, as its major mission, advising the Vietnamese in what were

called national security operations, or pacification. There were French officers who were working with me on this thing. The Vietnamese asked for me to go with them but not the French, and the French got very exercised about this. So this got up to the top level of MAAG and became a political issue. So General [John "Iron Mike"] O'Daniel asked the Vietnamese, because the French were saying, "Well, they say they don't want any foreigners going along." There was a big meeting about this. The Vietnamese explanation was that I wasn't a foreigner, I was their friend.

G: That's almost verbatim from Lansdale's book, I think.

P: Yes.

G: And it did happen that way?

P: It did happen that way.

So when they organized this operation, I went up there, and I tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, so I did not dress in uniform or anything like that. I went with Colonel Kim, stayed with him during this whole operation. It took about almost three months to really--two and a half months--because the method of evacuating the zone was set up by a joint commission composed of the French and the Viet Minh, and there was a French unit that acted as kind of a buffer between the Vietnamese army coming in and the Viet Minh evacuating. They started in part of Quang Ngai, and they evacuated in sections, going south all the way down to Binh Dinh, to Qui Nhon, which is where the troops went out--about fifteen thousand Viet Minh troops went out on troopships right at the end of this whole process. This thing was very, very successful. It was successful, first off, because during the

entire reoccupation operation, there was not a single incident between a Vietnamese soldier and a civilian, not one.

G: That's remarkable.

P: We're now talking about two divisions of troops; we're talking about Vietnamese army troops that, back when they were fighting under the French, had had a reputation for pillaging and stealing chickens and not having very good behavior with the civilian population.

I think there were two things that happened. One was that we really did--Colonel Kim carried out a very successful kind of indoctrination. The other was that there were a lot of stirrings of pride having to do with the fact that they now had an independent Vietnamese government that was not a puppet of the French, and that Diem was obviously not a puppet of anybody, because he was having so many difficulties with the French and in fact he was opposing French attempts to overthrow him, beginning with General Hinh, and then with the Binh Xuyen and the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. The people in the Vietnamese army and in general knew what the hell was going on and knew that the French were really trying to reassert control, and the fact that Diem was standing up gave him some real status as a nationalist leader. He already had a reputation as a nationalist leader because he'd never agreed to cooperate with the French. That's another story, about how he--that's one of the reasons, I think, really, why [Pierre] Mendes-France agreed to put him there, was sort of a last gesture to the Vietnamese.

In any case, the Vietnamese really began to get some real pride in themselves as people, as an army, as a country, and I think that helped



an awful lot. In any case, this whole thing went forward. This time the army was prepared with medical supplies; they were prepared with bridging materials, we had the engineers in there building roads, and in effect they started a really successful kind of development program concurrently with this reoccupation. And they could show that they were effective.

One element that we did not get going right away was we did not get the civilian teams that we should have had to set up government right away. But in general, the military functioned very, very well. In fact, so well that at the end of this whole operation, after only about two weeks after the Viet Minh had been evacuated north, Diem came up to Qui Nhon, and of course Kim organized a demonstration for him. But the demonstration had so much participation that a lot of it was spontaneous, because you couldn't simply organize these people that way. A lot of it was, I think, resentment against the Viet Minh who'd been there a long time and had really in many quarters, with at least the people that were sort of neutral or who were not, say, communist party members, had almost outworn their welcome. Because they were very repressive. They'd carried out land reform in a very arbitrary way.

And also because the government turned out to be a hell of a lot better than anybody expected. You see, the Viet Minh put out this propaganda that the Vietnamese army troops were going to come in and pillage and rape and so forth, and when they first came in the population just hung back. I mean, there was no response. They'd just sit there impassively. But then when the troops started trying to be helpful, this started to break down, and you could see the change as we

went further south. In other words, the troops became more adept and more at ease in dealing with the population, and the population started to gain confidence in the army. At the end of this thing, I still have somewhere in my files photographs of villagers coming out with bowls of water for the troops. Voluntarily. This was the spirit of this thing, the way it wound up. And that was reflected in that first visit of Diem, of which I have photographs, too, which was quite a demonstration, it really was. Part of it was, I think, a demonstration of support for the fact that Diem was in effect taking on the sects and taking on the French, because word about this was spreading like wildfire.

Well, I stayed there, and I remember one incident. We needed some supplies, we needed some bridging material, we needed some other stuff, and I kept sending communications down to MAAG and we weren't getting any response. So I told Kim, "Why don't we fly down there and see if we can't get something organized?" Well, of course, this was when the Binh Xuyen had cranked up their mini-revolt in Saigon, and the war in Saigon started. Kim and I arrived in town and took off--he went to his house and I went over to see Ed, and we were going to have a meeting with General O'Daniel down in MAAG the next morning. Kim came over and we said, "Well, you better not drive in your car, you better come with us." He said, "Gee, I don't even have a weapon." So I went and got and loaned him my pistol, so he'd have some weapon with him, and we drove down--I never will forget this--in order to get to MAAG, we had to go by this big Binh Xuyen post that's right in back of what was then MAAG headquarters, which was down in the middle of Cholon. Here all the Binh Xuyen were, manning the ramparts there. We went in and we started this

meeting with General O'Daniel, and all hell broke loose! Man, there were 105s coming over the MAAG headquarters, and stray bullets were going through the windows, and I never will forget, with all of us sort of slumped down in our chairs, like this, you know, so that the windows were up here someplace. (Laughter) And we were yelling at each other like this across the room, because you couldn't hear yourself think.

Finally we got through this and we said to Kim, "You'd better stick with us on the way back." We got in the car and started to go back up, and it had quieted down by this time. We went by this Binh Xuyen post which had been taken by the Vietnamese army and, boy, there were Binh Xuyen caps and uniforms all over the place; those guys had just shucked those things and gone into civvies and bugged out.

(Laughter)

G: They didn't stick around too long?

P: They didn't stick around, no.

Then I went back up to Qui Nhon with Kim, and sort of wound up that operation.

Let's see, what did I do next? Well, I guess I worked on plans to try to formalize some kind of what you would call a G-5 structure in the Vietnamese army and to set up a regular training program. We got some people in from Hawaii who worked for the U.S. Army psywar company there, to set up some training programs. We set up a psywar school.

Then I was due to be mustered out of the army in November, and I came back to the U.S. and was mustered out.

G: That was November of what year, now?

P: In 1955. Then Ed asked me to come back as a civilian, to help him out, and I debated that and decided to do that. So I joined as a regular staff member of the agency and went back out and was there in 1956, with the exception of about two months out for getting hepatitis.

I continued to work mainly with the Vietnamese army in setting up the psywar school and setting up a G-5 staff. The other big project I worked on was Vietnamese civic action, which was--the idea was really one of sending village development workers out in the villages to help the people dig wells and carry out sort of self-help projects.

There was a wonderful guy whose name I can't remember right now, but I will, who was appointed the head of this, and he had a very interesting history. He had been a general in the Viet Minh army, and he was one of two leaders who went out in revolt in Saigon in 1945 and led the initial Viet Minh resistance against the British and then subsequently against the French, because the British occupied Saigon first and then turned it over to the French. But he never was a communist, never joined the Communist Party. His name was Cung, Kieu Cong Cung. He became suspect when the Viet Minh started carrying out their land reform programs in 1950-51, and he was in Lao Cai, which is all the way up on the Chinese border; he'd been assigned up there. I think it was 1951 or 1952. And he decided that he just didn't want to have any more part of the Viet Minh, so he and his wife--and they had two small kids--he deserted, and they took off in the middle of the night, and using sort of false identities, they walked all the way from Lao Cai to South Vietnam. He retired on a farm, because he wouldn't have anything to do with the puppet Vietnamese governments either. But

when Diem came back, he came in and volunteered to help. So Diem assigned him to the civic action project.

So we worked on the organization of that and got a decree through, and sent some of his people over to the Philippines to take a look at what they were doing, and worked up a program to present to the AID mission, to get out some village development advisers and to give them some real assistance in village development. Somehow, AID had independently done a study of Vietnam and had determined that what Vietnam really needed was industrial development, that this was going to solve Vietnamese problems, and it ought to be concentrated in the cities. And they didn't want to have anything to do with the rural countryside. This became a big bone of contention between Lansdale, and through him, MAAG, with the AID mission. Because we said that, "Look, the problems are out in the countryside, and if you don't do something about that and we don't get an effective government on its feet out in the countryside, there's going to be real problems in the future. This is where the focus ought to be."

Unfortunately, we lost that fight and AID won. The Vietnamese went ahead and created civic action anyway, but it didn't have any real American help or participation, it didn't get any effective assistance. So you had these teams of guys going out there, but there really wasn't very much support, and the Vietnamese government structure was so bureaucratic that you couldn't get the other ministries to come in the way they were supposed to, and provide schools and teachers where they were needed, and provide the seeds and fertilizer where agricultural development was needed. So civic action never realized its potential

and unfortunately became more and more, later on, sort of a propaganda arm, and lost its credibility. But that was, I think, a very significant time in which Diem was very, very open to American advice and participation in what would have been a very, very vital effort, and the U.S. said, "No, we're not interested."

G: You think that was pretty important?

P: I think it was damned important. I think it was vital, and I think it might have had some real effect on how things might have evolved in South Vietnam.

At the same time, the Vietnamese wanted to keep a territorial army force, and we were insisting that they reorganize their armies in divisions, and we were insisting that the threat lay in some kind of overt invasion over the frontier. There was a group in MAAG that didn't agree with that either, again, mainly headed by Ed, because he knew from his experience in the Philippines, and he knew enough about how the communists operated, that we were going to see this problem again. This was not going away.

Also, it was apparent from what we learned out of these reoccupation operations that the Viet Minh were deliberately preparing themselves for a resurgence in the South. For example, not only did they leave people behind--that was fairly obvious--the other things they did, which were very significant, were that in Ca Mau and up in Interzone 5 they forcibly took, out of families, and not just families that were connected with the Viet Minh, but they literally kidnapped, in many instances, young men who were, say, from about eight to twelve, and took them up north with them. I'm not talking about small numbers, either,

I'm talking about over ten thousand. These were the guys that they put in training programs up north, and these were the guys that came back down south.

The other thing they did was they ordered all of their unmarried soldiers to marry Vietnamese women in that remaining period there. The word went out on this about around the end of 1954, and they had until, as I recall, May of 1955 before they evacuated completely. The word went out not only [to] marry them, but get them pregnant. And that established family connection on the part of all those who did not have family connections. And that, plus a few select people, was their plan. That was their stay-behind.

G: And you had firsthand knowledge of this?

P: We had firsthand knowledge of it, sure. They left saying, "We're going to come back."

G: Let me just clarify that picture a little bit. We know now, of course, what happened, the subversion that took place. Was it possible to discount the possibility of a Korea-style invasion from the North, do you think?

P: I don't think it was possible to discount it totally. But I think that if you really looked at it and said, "Well, if this happened, we were determined to apply American power," it could have been stopped fairly effectively, because there's only one road coming south, and there are a whole bunch of bridges, and it'd be damned hard to get any kind of regular army force through there in any significant numbers. The Ho Chi Minh Trail did not exist at this point; there were no facilities for getting people through Laos, so that anything that was going to move in

any substantial number would have to come down that coastal road. I don't say there wasn't any threat; sure, there was always that threat that they might do that, but the larger threat really lay in a resurgence of guerrilla warfare.

G: Were there efforts being made then to provide local security forces as opposed to the army?

P: Well, yes, there was something called the Civil Guard. The idea was sort of to try to model that after the Philippine Constabulary a little bit. They had had a kind of a *garde civil* before, but this never got organized properly; the commanders of it were weak, it became kind of an adjunct to the province chiefs. A lot of them used them as gardeners. The U.S. set up a training program utilizing Michigan State on contract, but they really didn't get very much training. They didn't have any status. I think that "Hanging Sam" [Samuel T.] Williams, who replaced General O'Daniel, was right in one thing, and that was that he was trying to take over the Civil Guard so he could get his hands on them and train them, and of course that was resisted by USAID, who had the responsibility--

G: Why was that?

P: It's a typical kind of bureaucratic struggle: don't take something away from me even if I'm not doing anything with it. This is part of my turf.

G: I've heard that it was a conceptual difference, that the Michigan people wanted them to be a police force and Williams wanted them to be a national guard-oriented kind of a thing.



P: Yes, I think that was part of the problem. We tried to work--I know that Ed got involved to some degree in trying to get the concept across that this had to be much more than a police force, that what we were talking about is really a kind of a replacement, under the Ministry of Interior, for what used to be the territorial armed forces. See, the armed forces were divided before into territorial forces and then regular units. When they did away with the territorial forces, which was in and of itself a mistake, the idea--at least the idea that some of us hoped would come about--would be that the Civil Guard would become that territorial force. They never did. So it left a security vacuum out in the countryside, too.

So you had two things that happened, really. One was that you had an economic development vacuum, and you had a security vacuum. Diem then, just as Ed was ending his time out there, made a mistake. Part of it was, I think, well motivated. He decided he would replace all of the village chiefs, because he didn't want the ones hanging on who had been sort of corrupt under the French and so forth. But the net result was that he put in a lot of new people that didn't know what the hell they were doing. They were out of touch. And he cut off a kind of a vital contact with what was going on down at the village level. And there was no program for village elections, or anything else, that was developed. So he created almost a governmental vacuum at the village level.

G: I think Lansdale says in his book that he didn't know that that was even in the works until he was gone.

P: Yes.

G: I wonder why that was. He was in touch, clearly, with so much that Diem was doing; I wonder why such a crucial thing was--

P: I don't know. Well, the Vietnamese didn't always have a kind of a broad view of how all these things interrelated with each other. I don't know whether that was kind of a political decision made by Nhu or not. We were having problems with Nhu already, in 1956, because he had a big plan to take over sort of political control of the army, and he wanted the G-5 to become kind of an agitprop-type organization, very similar to the commissars in the Soviet army, and we successfully fought that one off, working with Tran Trung Dung and his assistant, a guy named Nguyen Dinh Thuan, who were sort of the--Tran Trung Dung was the minister of defense. But--

G: Did you have much dealings with Nhu yourself?

P: No. Not during that period, none at all. I had some dealings with Tran Trung Dung and Thuan because they helped get civic action on its feet, although civic action was under the presidency. They provided a lot of logistics.

G: You mentioned two of the areas that you went to personally and were involved in extensively, and that was Ca Mau and then Interzone 5. Did you go to any other places in Vietnam for extensive periods?

P: Not at that time.

G: Not then. Were you operating more out of Saigon?

P: Yes, I was operating more out of Saigon and then going where something specifically was happening that the Vietnamese army was involved in.

G: I see.

P: I got up to some of the other provinces, and I got up to the high plateau, but I didn't really get very much involved. At that point, nobody was paying much attention to the Montagnards. That was still kind of a problem to be dealt with. But later on, Diem selected Colonel Kim, promoted him, made him general, sent him up to the high plateau to develop a special program for the Montagnards. I remember visiting him in, I think it was 1957 I went up there, went around with him and saw what he was doing.

Let me see if I've answered all your questions. I've been running off at the mouth here.

G: No, no, not at all. I was about to ask a question I'm not sure that you have any direct knowledge of, and that concerns the stay-behind activities that Lansdale had organized in the North, or was that compartmentalized so that you weren't party to it?

P: That was pretty compartmentalized; I wasn't involved with that.

G: I see.

P: I see, however, that that's being written up in some quarters as some kind of American attempt to destabilize the Viet Minh regime, and that's ridiculous, you know. The notion that a few guys in Hanoi, dropping contaminants into the electric power station and some other stuff, somehow is going to just destabilize the North Vietnamese regime, is absolutely absurd.

G: Well, what was the point?

P: Well, what I can recall from the time, because I was not directly involved but I knew that some of this was going on, the point was just to slow the bastards down. I mean, we didn't know whether they were

going to come roaring south as soon as the French got to the point where they reduced their troops, and the South was absolutely disorganized and defenseless. So the idea was to do something that would preoccupy them a little bit up there, give them some difficulties in trying to administer things, and keep them off of the back of the South. That was the purpose. It was as simple as that.

G: I don't suppose you had any hand in the famous almanac incidents, did you?

P: Oh, yes.

G: Did you really? Tell me about that.

P: Well, the reason I got involved in it was that the guy who had been working with this--there was a Vietnamese journalist who came down from the North, very interesting guy, who you might interview. He's down in Richmond. His name is Bui An Tuan, T-U-A-N.

G: Go ahead.

P: He was an interesting guy and a very good writer. He had been part of the VNQDD [Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang], which was the old nationalist party. Ed met him--I don't know how he met him--but got interested in him because he was a good writer and he'd written some pieces about what Vietnam ought to do. So he sort of encouraged him to try to write some political tracts along the lines, and even gave him a copy of Tom Paine's *Common Sense*. This was to try to get some notion in print as to why should the South Vietnamese even resist and why should they even try to put together a country. This may sound silly to ask those questions, but there were thousands of South Vietnamese asking that question of themselves: "Why don't we just lie down and give up? We've had it.

This country has no future. There isn't even a country. What is this, cut off halfway down, no government, the police force in the hands of the Binh Xuyen, Diem's own palace guard in the hands of the Binh Xuyen, the Binh Xuyen running Saigon and running all the rackets, the army trying to pull a coup against Diem sponsored by the French, the sects with their own military forces off doing their own thing. I mean, this is no country and it's got no future."

One of the things that was obviously desperately needed was to try to develop some notion of a Vietnamese cause, a political cause. I mean, why should anybody even try to put a government together? There were plenty of nationalists around who were anticommunist because of their experience and the fact that they'd had relatives killed by the communists, and that Ho Chi Minh had really stabbed the nationalist movement in the back. So there was a lot of bitterness over that, but there was a lot of hostility to the French. Diem was powerless; he seemed weak because he didn't have any authority so, you know, what was the meaning of it? So the idea was to try to encourage people that had some ability to write, to write about these things. And he did, and he got some pretty good stuff published in the newspapers. He published a pamphlet, which we helped them [with]. We paid for the cost of printing it. But I wasn't involved in that.

Then the guy who was working with him left and so I was asked, when I was in Saigon at least, to kind of look after him and talk to him. I think it was Ed, really, who got this idea, because we were looking at the fact that, first of all, the Vietnamese depend heavily on soothsayers. Secondly, there were a number of soothsayers that put out

their own publications, and they sold very well. And they'd make predictions for the Chinese New Year. Ed got this idea about, "Well, could we put one together?" We'd sponsor it, pay for it, but it would be a Vietnamese deal, and so he said, "Talk to Tuan about this and see what he thinks." So I talked to him about it. He thought it was a crazy idea. He said, "Well, you know, these people are very independent. They won't do anything like that." I said, "Well, why don't you go approach a couple of them? I'll bet you there are some that for a little money will make up whatever predictions you want." (Laughter)

So he went around and he rounded up some, including a couple of fairly well-known ones, and he put the whole thing together. He came up with the idea of how to design it and who would focus on what aspects, and so forth and so on. He even had a couple of guys that weren't part of this deal at all, and they were writing just neutral stuff about--you know, there was a lot of stuff that would interest somebody who was worried about when should he marry; all of the family and personal stuff was in there, too. But there were a couple of big predictions that had to do with political events. One of them was that Diem was going to succeed, and the other one was that this one particular--Chung Kien?--or I've forgotten his name, he was not the secretary general of the party in North Vietnam, but he was a rising star in the--

G: Truong Chinh?

P: I think so.

G: "Long March." He was the--

P: He was a real hard-core type.

G: Yes, pro-Chinese.

- P: Yes, a real hard-core type; that he was going to suffer a reverse. And so this thing was put out and it sold very well.
- G: What did you do with the money?
- P: Paid us back for all the investment. (Laughter)
- G: And it made a splash. Well, I'd heard some of this; I wasn't sure if it all fit together, but it does. That's good.
- P: So that's how I got involved in that.
- G: Is that a typical Lansdale kind of idea?
- P: Well, he had a lot of very imaginative ideas like that. I would say that his greatest imagination was really on what you might call the positive political side, or how do you get a government like this on its feet, and what kind of things should the president be doing, and what kind of program. Because when he went out there, he really stunned Diem, I think, the first time he ever saw him, because he listened to him, and he went with the guy who was then head of USIS, PAO George Hellyer, who spoke very good French, and Diem told them this whole story. So he asked him questions, and Ed asked him how would he feel if he--Ed--drew up some thoughts about a political program for him. Well, Diem thought this was great.

So Ed went back and he wrote up a political program for Vietnam, for the President, but for Vietnam, and came back and presented it to Diem, and Diem, I think, was really stunned by that. He started to pick up on ideas about what to do and how the government should function and so forth and so on. I think that was how Ed really established rapport with Diem, because Diem felt that he understood his problems, that he

understood the country, and he had some ideas to give. That began a very, very interesting relationship.

G: Yes, I want to ask a little bit about that. It's just occurred to me: one of the things that puzzled me the first time I came across this whole story, which was a number of years ago, was that Colonel Lansdale's position is rather anomalous in some ways.

P: It was, yes.

G: [It's] hard to figure out where he fits in a neat bureaucratic structure. And of course the answer is that he doesn't fit at all.

P: Yes, that's both his virtue and one of the problems that he encountered in working.

G: Well, since he was wearing a uniform, and you originally were wearing a uniform, and theoretically were working for General Williams, how does this work out?

P: Well, General O'Daniel, first.

G: O'Daniel first, yes, and then Williams. How did he operate that way?

P: I think that, first of all, they very quickly came to appreciate the fact that, one, Ed was one of the few people that really knew what was going on; that secondly, he had a very good concept of the total meaning of national security in Vietnam. And third, that he could get things done, and if they wanted to sell an idea to Diem, an idea that was worthwhile, that one of the best channels was to go through Ed. So they gave him a very wide latitude.

He'd run into problems with guys like J. Lawton Collins, who thought that whatever [Paul] Ely told him was the truth, because they'd both been comrades in World War II. And he ran into problems with the



regular CIA station because they were terribly jealous, and he was operating all over the landscape, in effect.

G: Now you've just said something that puzzled me. You referred to the regular CIA station. Does that mean Lansdale was the irregular CIA station?

P: He was, yes.

G: Was there another chief of station?

P: Yes, there was.

G: Who was that, or can you say?

P: I've forgotten who it was.

G: Okay. Well, I can see that this breaks all kinds of bureaucratic crockery.

P: Of course it does. Lots of bureaucratic crockery got broken, particularly when some of the people that they were in touch with didn't want to talk to them anymore because they didn't find anything there to talk about, and wanted to deal with Ed because they felt Ed had some ideas about how to do something.

G: I can see where you can get into deadly circumstances that way, all right.

(Interruption)

P: One of Lansdale's people had been out of the service for some time and sort of had forgotten his military courtesy to some degree. You know, you get rain during the rainy season. So he arrives at MAAG, and Williams always used to get there earlier, and he had an office up where he could look down on the courtyard. And this fellow comes in and the rain starts, so he unfurls an umbrella, and he--(Laughter)

G: Officers are not supposed to carry umbrellas.

P: No, sir! Boy, did that ever hit the fan!

(Laughter)

G: Yes.

P: That was Williams.

G: How long then did you stay in Vietnam? Let's say from 1956, were you there continuously?

P: No, I was there from 1954 through the end of 1956.

G: I see. So you weren't there when some of these programs that I have listed here were begun, I take it, the Denunciation of Communism movement, the--?

P: No.

G: Okay, and--

P: Land reform, yes, I knew Wolf Ladejinsky, but not personally. I had some contact with him. Land reform did get started in 1956, at least the thought got started, the program really didn't get started.

G: Yes, I guess the legal part of it was pronounced in any case.

Did you know Lou Conein? Was he there?

P: Oh, yes, I've known Lou--we're personal friends. Known him a long time.

G: I asked a question here about the sects and Diem's victory over them, but I think you may have said pretty much about that.

P: Well, it was highly significant, because it really was Diem versus the French, and it was pretty well known that the French were trying to maneuver through the sects. The Binh Xuyen had no support whatsoever; I mean, these guys were a bunch of gangsters.

G: They've been compared with the Mafia. What do you think of that?

P: That's not too different. I remember one of the things they operated in Saigon, among all the other rackets, which included opium, prostitution, the gambling halls, and everything else--Saigon in 1954 and in the early part of 1955, until Diem cracked down on it, was a wide-open city. It was like Shanghai in 1944, 1945, at the end of the war, or prewar Shanghai. I mean it was just wide open. Well, they ran all the vice, because Bao Dai had sold the police force to them.

Well, one of the things they operated was a car-stealing ring, and they'd take cars and redo them and sell them. We had heard about this, and I had a jeep stolen. I had an old army jeep that was painted blue, and damn if they didn't steal this thing. I figured that they'd done it, so I went down and protested personally to the police chief. I knew the bastard was probably responsible, but I went in and made a formal protest and really raised hell about it, just for the fun of it.

G: He never acknowledged anything, of course?

P: Of course not. We got the jeep back.

G: I heard a story about a car that got sent south from up north that had a background.

P: (Laughter) I'll let Ed tell you about that, okay? All I know is that we had a bunch of cars, and I don't know where they came from, but I used them.

G: Okay.

P: The other thing that's kind of interesting was that during this period, the French were carrying out a psywar campaign against the Americans, and they--

G: To what end? What were they--?

P: Well, they were trying to frighten us or get us to go home or--you know, there was this thing where the French intelligence was really overrunning the Binh Xuyen. I mean, they were over in the headquarters there. And at the same time, some of their guys were in TRIM, and we kind of figured out after a while that half of these guys were not interested in doing any work, they were just there to watch us, to watch the Americans and see what the hell--particularly [what] Lansdale was doing. And all this legitimate activity, which was really legitimate, they couldn't understand. They thought there must be some hidden meaning to all this pacification operation. I don't know whether they thought we had two divisions up there that we were going to suddenly put on a ship and march into Saigon or what, but they were really--they started blowing up cars and they planted a bomb in the office of the USIS, the library, and blew the front of it to smithereens.

G: The French did that? How did we know that it was the French?

P: Well, we traced it back--first of all, they'd put out some propaganda that was obviously phony, I mean, they had a front, "The Front for a Free Vietnam Opposed to American Domination," and so forth and so on, and just by checking around, it sort of targetted in on a couple of the Deuxième Bureau, who were engaged in this deal. Why they thought they were going to frighten us off with this kind of stuff, I don't know. But they did, they tried it, and it just never went anywhere. I got a poison pen note in the mail from them.

G: I was going to ask if you thought this was some of the old French *colons* around?

P: There was a little bit of that, you know. What happened was that after Diem was put in power, the old French Colonial Office folks really reasserted themselves, and they were the ones who were involved in the plotting, and they would lie to Ely about what the hell was going on; they wouldn't keep him fully informed, and then Ely would tell Lawton Collins, and Lawton Collins would believe it. And he wouldn't believe even visual evidence. There was a guy named Howie Simpson, who was with USIS, who got around a lot and knew a lot of the French, and for some reason Bay Vien, who was the head of the Binh Xuyen, really liked him. So he went over to talk to him. This was when the war in Saigon really started up. They were sitting around having a drink or something over in his house. He had this incredible house with this courtyard, and around it he had cages of tigers and so forth, live tigers, and in comes this dispatch rider from French army headquarters, and snaps to a salute and says, "A message for you, General, from So-and-so," just giving him his orders. (Laughter) And Howie is sitting there, you see?

So he goes back and reports this to Collins, and Collins wouldn't believe him. He said, "No, that can't be true; no, I don't believe that. That's directly contrary to everything that General Ely has told me."

G: How would you contrast that with the relationship that Lansdale had with Trinh Minh Thé?

P: Well, that was a very interesting thing. I wasn't directly involved in it, but I know that Ed received an invitation to go up and visit Trinh Minh Thé. This was when Thé was still in dissidence, I mean, he wasn't having anything to do with anybody. He had broken off from the Cao Dai

because he felt that the French were too dominant there, and he was against the Viet Minh, against the French, and he wasn't for Diem, either. He wasn't for anybody. Except he was a real nationalist.

Ed went up to visit him at his invitation and spent all day up there, or maybe two days, with him. And they just talked and talked, and he asked him about Magsaysay and the experience in the Philippines, and they really got very close, personally. He asked him about Diem, and did he think he could trust Diem, and Ed said, "Well, I think so. I think this guy's a real nationalist." As a result of that relationship, Ed was sort of the bridge between Trinh Minh Thé and Diem. The came in and decided to support Diem.

So during this famous Vietnamese Day national parade, he sent five thousand of his men down, and they marched in the parade. Very interesting, they didn't have enough shoes to go around so all the guys on the outside file wore the shoes.

G: I heard that didn't help you with the French any.

P: No, well, there were a lot of things that--the Vietnamese didn't help us with the French, either, because they weren't above sort of razzing the French a little bit. One of the things they did was, they had a unit that went out and secretly learned the American manual of arms. So when they got in front of the reviewing stand, here's TRIM up there, all of the American and French brass, as well as the Vietnamese generals, this unit comes around, smartly stops, turns, does a right face, and then goes through the American manual of arms and, you know, oh, terrible. The French are gnashing their teeth. The Americans, honest to God, did

not know anything about it. The Vietnamese did it deliberately just to stick a red-hot poker up the rear end of the French.

G: And the military men would understand the psychic messages involved.

P: The psychic message--

(Laughter)

--caused all kinds of severe heartburn.

G: And the French would be especially sensitive to something like that, I would imagine.

P: Well, of course. There were some very sympathetic guys among the French. There was a fellow named [Jacques] Romaine-Defosses, who was the senior French guy--

G: Could you spell that one? I'm not sure that I've come across him.

P: Romaine, R-O-M-A-I-N-E, D-E, dash, F-O-S-S-E-S.

G: Okay. Got it.

P: Who was quite a gentleman, he really was. He had been in Vietnam for something like eighteen years, and he really felt very close to the Vietnamese and very strongly about them, and he was very--on the one hand, he didn't want them to go under, and on the other hand, this fact that he had this relationship with them, and here they were sort of courting the Americans, was a real problem for him, an emotional problem for him. One of the Frenchmen put it to me this way. He said, "To understand how we feel, how would you feel if you had a mistress, and you were very, very close to her. Finally, after this long relationship, you broke it off because really you couldn't afford to support her anymore. You're sitting in a sidewalk cafe, and the very next day she comes roaring by in this Cadillac with this American. (Laughter) How

would you feel?" I said, "I wouldn't feel very good." He said, "Now you understand how we feel."

G: That's a very French way of putting it, isn't it? That's good.

P: So there was a lot of that. And I remember getting into a long discussion with them about this whole situation. They were saying, "Well, you're doing it all wrong," and I said, "Well, I don't know if we're doing it all wrong or not, but we're trying to help these people, and you guys tried and you failed. I think the reason you failed was you never really let the Vietnamese be independent." They said, "We've always backed the Vietnamese." I said, "Well, let me ask you one question. Why did the French government make a deal with Ho Chi Minh at Fontainebleau which permitted the Viet Minh to get access to French Secret Service files, and to go out and round up thousands of Vietnamese nationalists and kill them? What kind of deal was that? You guys are still paying for that, you know." They didn't know I knew about this, and there was just a dead, dead silence.

You know, they were ashamed of a lot of things, too, and it was a painful thing for them, very, very painful. And I can understand why it was painful. A lot of them were good people who loved Vietnam, loved the Vietnamese, and they felt badly about Dien Bien Phu, and about abandoning the North, too; they felt very badly about that. Because when you really looked at the situation in Vietnam, the Viet Minh were almost as strong in the South as they were in the North. The old notion that somehow the Viet Minh were all up north, you see--they weren't. There was an awful lot of noncommunist North that was given up.

G: Sure.



P: So it was a very tragic--then there was a lot of bitterness about Dien Bien Phu. I remember going into a nightclub with a couple of French officers. This one guy had been in Dien Bien Phu, captured and released by the Viet Minh. And [Christian de La Croix] de Castries shows up in a whole entourage of officers. And this guy had to be physically restrained from attacking de Castries.

G: Wow!

P: He said, "That son of a bitch was drinking champagne, having champagne dropped in when our troops were dying," and oh, God, he was bitter. So you had all this kind of a reaction.

G: The French were torn within and among themselves as well.

P: Sure. Yes. They really were.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I