INTERVIEW II

DATE: March 20, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM J. JORDEN

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Ambassador Jorden's residence, McLean, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1

G:Why don't we start off with how you came to enter government service. How did that develop?

J:I was a newspaperman, had been for a good many years. I had spent about thirteen-fourteen years writing about foreign policy and I finally decided that I really didn't know how foreign policy was really made, how it worked, and I decided I would never find out from the outside, that I would only find out by living with it day after day, week after week. This was early 1961. The Kennedy Administration had just come in, and a number of people in and around government had told me in effect, "If you know so goddamn much about foreign policy, why don't you go in and do something about it?" I had several offers, and I thought, "That's not a bad idea. I will go in and do what I can, live with it, make a contribution such as I can, and after a couple of years I'll get out and go back to newspapering and writing about foreign policy with a good deal more understanding and appreciation of what it's all about." So I went in, and my first assignment was as a member of the Policy Planning Council in the State Department. I just went from one interesting assignment to another, and I woke up seventeen years later and found that I could retire.

G:You'll forgive me for observing that there's quite a hiatus there between the Policy Planning Council and discovering that you could retire, but--

J:Yes. Well, I'm just saying that that's how I got in and that was the outcome.

G:Yes. Was Walt Rostow the head of the Policy Planning Council then?

J:He was not. George McGhee was the head of the Policy Planning Council.

G: And Rostow took over, I guess, shortly thereafter?

J:And Walt replaced George McGhee. But more to the point, since one of the central focuses of all of this is Vietnam, I went in; I was sworn in and went to work, and one of the first things that happened was that I was called over to the White House. Walt Rostow was then McGeorge Bundy's deputy on national security affairs, and Walt told me that President Kennedy was terribly concerned about the situation in Southeast Asia and most particularly about Vietnam, but before he made any decision about what he was going to do, where he was going to go, he really wanted to find out what the situation was in South Vietnam and whether the things he had been reading about and hearing about in fact added up to a form of aggression or an internal civil war. If it was a civil war pure and simple, a bunch of South Vietnamese fighting with other South Vietnamese about who was going to dominate their little country, that was one thing. If it was a deliberately planned,

organized invasion of the country from outside, he wanted to know about it, and then his reaction was going to be very different. In any case, the upshot was that within weeks of my going into the government I went to South Vietnam, and I spent several months looking at the situation, interviewing people, looking at documents, trying to find out as a reporter what the hell was going on here.

G:Did you use the same techniques that you would have if you had been researching a story for the ***New York Times*** or--?

J:Absolutely the same techniques, except that I had a hell of a lot more access than I would have had as a reporter. That is, within days after arriving in Saigon, I was talking to the head of intelligence for the South Vietnamese government; I was talking to high officials in the U.S. Government on a very candid basis. The doors that would probably have been closed to any normal reporter were open to me as a government official.

G:Let me get a cast of characters here. The ambassador at that time would have been Elbridge Durbrow, is that right?

J: Fritz [Frederick] Nolting.

G:Oh, he was already there? Okay. And the head of the MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] would have been--?

J: Paul Harkins.

G:Okay. I thought Lionel McGarr would have been there at that time. Was he already gone?

J:I think he was gone. My memory is of Paul Harkins. In any case, at that point the MAAG was a very small unit, not heavily manned, not very competent. My contacts were mainly with the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese government, and I just spent a heck of a lot of time poring over documents, interviewing prisoners, looking at all of the physical evidence of what had been happening, who was doing what, and so on and so on. Then the upshot of that was that after several months of research and study and exploration, I sat down and wrote what turned out to be a government white paper on Vietnam, called ***A Threat to the Peace***.

G: This was a State Department paper--

J:Which came out as a State Department white paper on the situation in Vietnam. I think I've got copies of it here. I'd love to read some excerpts because they are rather illuminating.

G: What was the burden of this paper? What was your thesis?

J:The central conclusion that I came to after looking at all the evidence that was available was that there was a clearly planned, organized invasion of South Vietnam, directed, manned, and manipulated by the authorities in Hanoi with the support of the Soviet Union and Communist China.

G: Now, this was a public release?

J: Indeed. Yes. I think, as I remember, [in] December 1961.

G:Yes. My impression is that it was not kindly received by certain segments of the media. I. F. Stone, for example.

J:No. No, that's a later chapter. It was received; it was reported and so on, not with the emphasis that it should have had, not with the muscle it should have had politically. It came out as a State Department document, and if you want to attract little attention in terms of public awareness and political perception, you release something as a State Department document. It was a damn well-written piece of work and very well documented. I say that with total prejudice, but in any case, it should have come out with the imprimatur of the White House; it should have come out with an irate statement by the President of the United States or at least by the Secretary of State. But it just sort of floated like a feather on the wind of the Washington atmosphere in 1961, which was, as you remember, concerned with a hell of a lot of other things that attracted much more attention than this rather obscure struggle going on in Southeast Asia. [A] total misjudgment on the part of the political leadership, because I went out because the President of the United States said that he wanted evidence of what was going on, and thereafter he would make his decision of what to do. And I went out and I found the evidence, and I wrote the paper, and it was like whistling in an arctic blizzard. It just got buried among a thousand other things. Everybody thought it was a great job of reporting, but it had all the political impact of a minor congressional election in an off year.

G:Did you talk to Dean Rusk about this? Did he call you in or congratulate you?

J: No, he didn't call me in.

G: Who did you write the paper for? Who was the next [inaudible]?

J:I was led to believe I was writing it for John Kennedy. That was my impression. In any case, I wrote it, and it went to the White House, and Mac Bundy and Walt Rostow and everybody else concerned thought it was a great job and just what the doctor ordered, because it gave them the factual foundation for what they suspected but didn't know. And of course it led on to other things, but in terms of public impact, in terms of the awareness of the American people, which was a crucial element as time went along, it was almost nonexistent. I don't think anybody in Dubuque ever read that white paper.

G:So you sort of waited for the other shoe to fall and nothing happened. Is that right?

J: Something like that, yes.

G: What happened next?

J: I'm trying to remember when the wall went up in Berlin.

G: That would have been about 1962, I guess.

J:That was August, I think, August 5 or 6 or something like that of 1962. I was working on this problem, that problem, and so on and so on. When the wall went up in Berlin, I went to Germany.

G: To do what?

J: To figure out a way to keep Berlin alive.

G: You mean economically?

J: Economically, politically, emotionally, psychologically.

G: What did you come up with?

J:I came up with a program called the Berlin Viability Plan, which brought American investment into Berlin, got American companies to put money in to keep people employed, to keep students from running out of Berlin to West Germany, to focus the attention of the world on the problem, and, in short, to keep what is known as the bastion of democracy alive and thriving. And, by God, it worked.

G: You say that with a note of surprise.

J:Oh no, no, no. Not surprise but with considerable satisfaction that one can get into a problem and look at it and see what the parameters are, and see what is needed, and to get the kind of support that we got from private enterprise, from the government, from educational institutions, et cetera, to keep a major city alive at a moment of crisis. When you're in government and you're working and trying to find answers to problems, it's always very satisfying when you find an answer here and there.

G: Who was mayor of Berlin then? Was it Willy Brandt?

J:No, it was not. Jesus! Well, it was somebody who later became chancellor, but--

G: [Ludwig] Erhard?

J:I've forgotten his name. I've forgotten his name, but I'll think of it. He was an economist and--

G: Yes. A rather heavy-set fellow--

J:No, not very heavy-set. Rather lean, very bright, and--in any case, it's not important. We'll think of it.

G:We'll think of it. My real purpose in asking that was to try to get at what kind of German input you had into that paper.

J: German input?

G: Yes.

J:Oh, God! Well, you know, I talked to Germans from morning to night day after day, day after day. I not only went to Berlin, but I travelled all through western Germany to Bonn, to Stuttgart, to Cologne, to all of the major cities; Frankfurt, Hamburg, so on and so on, to get them to get the business interests and the political forces and so on solidly aligned behind a program of survival for Berlin. Of course, the Germans felt deeply about what was happening to their former capital, and they responded very well. Their response, in turn, made it easier to talk to American businessmen and officials, lawyers, doctors, and so on, all of the things that are needed to stimulate a program of survival for a city.

G:This is interesting, because my understanding is that the military viewpoint was very pessimistic about Berlin, that if the balloon goes up, Berlin is indefensible; we couldn't possibly hold it.

J:That was the general military assessment, yes. But my thought, my purpose, was to figure out ways in which one could make the continued existence of Berlin viable without military means, politically, economically, and psychologically.

G: So it was not really a military question?

J:No. No, it was not like the crisis of--what? 1948 or 1947, when we had to have the airlift and when the Communists tried to blockade Berlin. This was a blockade through half of a city, but it was a severe psychological blow. And how I got to Berlin to do all this I have absolutely no vague memory or understanding, because I had absolutely no experience in Germany or western Europe. All of my experience had been in Asia. In any case, [it was] very satisfying to see it work.

G: Then you came back when? About early 1963?

J:On the Berlin thing I was back and forth, back and forth, in 1962 to early 1963. I can't be very precise about these goddamn dates, because, as I told you, human memory is fallible. My recollection is that in 1963 at some point George McGhee became under secretary of state for political affairs, and he asked me to join him in that office. Then, for reasons that are totally obscure to me, he was replaced by Averell Harriman and he went off to be, I think, ambassador to Bonn, and Averell Harriman became under secretary of state, and I was on Harriman's staff in 1963-64 as special assistant to the under secretary.

G: Now he was just fresh from the Laos--

J: Debacle?

G: --agreements, yes.

J: Yes, fresh from Laos.

G:Someone has characterized him as a Europeanist as opposed to someone who really cared about Asia. Is that your impression?

J:Didn't give a damn about Asia or Africa or anyplace else. I mean, he thought the heart of the world was in the United States-western Europe axis and that was the end-all and be-all, and the rest of the world was trivial--except the Soviet Union, of course.

By the way, can I set some limitations on the use of any of this, because--

G: By all means. Surely.

J:--I don't want anything I say about Averell Harriman to be used while he's alive, which may not be very long.

G: You can put any limits you wish.

J:No, I just think Averell Harriman is the most overrated man in American public life, but--

G: Why did they call him "The Crocodile"?

J:Oh, it was one of those journalistic cliches that develops about somebody who's supposedly tough and snarling and dangerous, and so on. A bunch of bullshit, but--

G: Fair enough.

J:It became part of the journalistic fashion to describe him as "The Crocodile," although I must say that he had big jaws and sharp teeth.

G: Did you ever find occasion to feel those teeth?

J:I didn't, really. No, no. Sort of like my experience with Lyndon Johnson; everybody had told me--everybody who had worked for him [Harriman], you know--how nasty he was and bitter and just raised unshirted hell and so on and so on. He never did with me, and I never understood why any more than I understood why Lyndon Johnson never blew his stack or raised hell with me. I realize that it was a strange and unusual position and that they were both sons of bitches in regard to certain individuals. But I never felt it. I felt a lot of his pettiness, and I listened to repetitious stories and so on, but he never chewed on me, because if he had I would have walked out. I think maybe he knew that.

G: He was very sensitive about how people felt.

J:Yes, yes. I mean, he knew who he could chew on, and he knew who he couldn't.

G:So you went to work for Averell Harriman in 1963, and then Southeast Asia began to heat up all over again.

J:Yes. One of the things that I just recalled, when I was working for Harriman--I don't remember whose idea it was--well, it could have been my idea for all I know--in any case, there were people in government who felt that the sort of psychological informational aspect of policy was not getting all the attention it should, above and beyond the straight decisions to do this or do that for this political or economic reason, and so on. And I set up a small working group in the Under Secretary's office, which was a kind of a psychological warfare operation, to try to look at problems coming down the road and to see if there was anything one could do to improve understanding in advance of the problem. It was a very small group, and we had a couple of representatives from State, from Defense, from CIA, et cetera.

I remember with great pleasure one of the operations we engaged in. You may remember that at that time in 1963-64 there was a good deal of concern about nuclear proliferation. We had fairly good intelligence at the time that the Chinese had been working desperately on the problem of nuclear energy and a nuclear explosion, and we knew pretty well how far their research had gone, and we knew that it was only a matter of time until they had the bomb.

My feeling was that if we suddenly woke up one morning and found that the Chinese had exploded a nuclear bomb at Lop Nor, that it was going to cause a great deal of consternation in our country and in the rest of the world. And so I presented the case and got agreement to gradually put out a certain amount of information that the Chinese were working on this problem intensively, and that they were using scientists from here, there, and everywhere and that the center of their experi-

ments was in this part of the country, and so on and so on. It just developed in a very natural way to the point where we forecast that there would be a Chinese nuclear explosion within a reasonable period of time. This was covered very fairly, accurately, honestly by the press, and by the time the Chinese bomb was exploded, the whole world knew that there was going to be a Chinese bomb, and it caused all of the ripples of a very small pebble in a very big pond. Whereas if it had come unprepared and out of the blue, suddenly, it would have caused consternation. This way it caused no problem at all because the whole world and the American people were psychologically prepared for the fact that the Chinese were going to have a nuclear device. If you look back at the press coverage of the event you will find that it was, "As we told you, there was an explosion yesterday." That's the kind of thing that we were engaged in, and it worked rather well.

G:I remember the emphasis was that they had a bomb, but they didn't have any way to get it any place.

J: Well, that came next. (Laughter) Could we turn it off for a moment?

(Interruption)

G: Now you're quoting from the State Department white paper?

J:Yes, we're going back to the white paper called ***A Threat to the Peace***, which was introduced to a waiting world in December of 1961:

> What follows is a study of Viet Cong activities in South Vietnam and of the elaborate organization in the North that supports those activities. The Communists have made the most elaborate efforts to conceal their role and to prevent any discoveries that would point an accusing finger at them for causing what is happening, but their efforts have not been totally successful. In such a large-scale operation, there are always some failures. There are defections; there are human frailties and some misjudgment. In major military operations, prisoners are taken and documents are seized. All these and more have occurred in Vietnam. Over the years the authorities in Saigon have accumulated a mass of material exposing the activities of the Viet Cong.

And then it goes on to describe the study:

> What emerges from the study is a detailed but by no means exhaustive picture of Viet Cong operations and of the program of the Communist government in Hanoi to win power over all of Vietnam. The government of the United States believes that picture should be presented to the world. There can be no doubt that the government of the Republic of Vietnam is fighting for its life. Those who would help the people of South Vietnam to remain outside the Communist orbit must have a thorough appreciation of the nature of that fight and of the way it is being conducted by the authorities in Hanoi and their disciplined followers in the South.

And it goes on from there. It isn't really a very bad description of what was happening. Most of the American press chose to picture what was happening as an internal event, a civil war, one faction

against the other in the South, and yet it was clear from the very beginning that the whole thing was planned, organized, manned, operated, armed, and supported from Hanoi with the support of the Soviet Union and Peking.

G:If I may take a devil's advocate position for a moment, someone might quarrel with that by saying, "And yet it wouldn't have gotten anywhere if there hadn't been a readiness in the South of some sort to support or cooperate with the effort from the North."

J:Oh, I think that's quite true. I think that's quite true. I don't think that's a devil's advocate position; that's a very realistic position. I think there was great frustration. I think a lot of people in the South were still recovering from the aftermath of French colonialism. I think there were a great many southerners who, in an emotional and idealistic way, felt that Ho Chi Minh and his followers and the Viet Minh forces, by overcoming the French, represented an important strain in Vietnamese nationalism and patriotism and pride and so on. So I think there was an emotional readiness in the South to be somewhat sympathetic to Ho Chi Minh and to the Viet Minh organization, and if that had not existed at all, there would have been no possibility for the kind of thing that followed. On the other hand, I think there was a great deal of southern nationalism. As you know, Vietnam was once described not as one country but three countries: the North, the Middle, and the South. There were strong local feelings in all of those areas, in Saigon, in Hué, and in Hanoi, and a great suspicion on the part of many, many southerners about what these bloody northerners were going to do, or would do or might do or whatever. So it went both ways. I think there was sympathy; I think there was opposition. I think Hanoi played their cards a hell of a lot better than the United States did.

G: What position did Ngo Dinh Diem occupy at this time?

J: In 1961? He was president.

G:This was a formal description, but you mentioned the position that Ho Chi Minh held in the minds of the Vietnamese. Where does Diem fit in there? Is he a figure of respect or--?

J:Diem? My impression was that sentiment in the South was rather ambivalent. I think there was a great deal of respect for Diem as a good Confucian leader, as an intellectual, as a forceful man, as a man of determination, and so on. I don't think Ngo Dinh Diem was ever deeply loved by the people of South Vietnam. It is after all a Buddhist country, and Diem was a Catholic. Also, Diem was not a true southerner. He was a man of the Middle, of Hué, the middle kingdom. Many of the methods and techniques that he, and especially his brother, used in controlling the country were repressive, and they antagonized a lot of authentic southern leaders and politicians. So I think it was a deeply mixed feeling about the man and his family, that they were proud of him in many ways and they despised him in many ways. Unfortunately, because of his rule and his methods, it was awfully hard for other elements in the politics of Vietnam to emerge, to rise, to develop. It was

not a democracy and it was not the kind of society where young, talented, able, thoughtful people could readily move ahead and develop. So it was really a mixed bag, but I think that by and large, all things taken into consideration, that Diem, but more particularly the kind of political system they had in the South, and the social system and the relative freedom were important--they were things that the average Vietnamese found a hell of a lot more attractive than what they had in North Vietnam. When the partition came after 1954 and the Geneva Accords, the fact that a million people moved from North Vietnam to South Vietnam says something about what their basic feelings were and what they were voting for "with their feet," as we say.

G: Yes. Did you know Diem's brother, Nhu?

J: I met him once.

G: What were your impressions?

J:I didn't like him. He was rather--I don't know, sort of--terribly hard to describe. He was a kind of Iago-like figure, "too clever by half," snide and shrewd, an operator. I think Diem himself was a hell of a lot more attractive as a person, although he had a lot of flaws as well, but nothing like his brother, who was a rather vicious man.

G: Why do you say vicious?

J:In those days I used to talk to a lot of Vietnamese who told me stories of what they'd gone through or people in their family had gone through, and inevitably the blame was placed on Nhu, not on Diem. And I think nine times out of ten, not without reason.

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J:He was very active in the police organization. I think he was just a considerably less appealing character than his older brother.

G:You mentioned the police before, when you were talking about your sources on Vietnam when you were writing the white paper, when you were doing the research. Do you remember who the chief operator was?

J: Dr. [Tran Kim] Tuyen.

G: A very small, diminutive guy?

J: About five foot, five-one, maybe.

G: Yes. Did you ever have any dealings with Mai Huu Xuan?

J: No.

G: But you clearly recognize the name?

J: Yes.

G: From what connection?

J:Just from the vague mix that swirls around in my noggin, but nothing sharp. But Dr. Tuyen I knew very well. I used to go to his house and had many dinners with him and so on. He was one of these

strange characters in the politics of our time who usually is described in a quite exaggerated way as a sinister character, sort of out of Dostoevsky. The head of the secret police; one thinks of Dzerzhinsky and other like characters, who've headed rather ominous secret police departments. Tuyen was not the type at all, although he had that reputation. He was a doctor; he was a thoroughly civilized man, well-read. I have no doubt that he was not only capable of but did carry out some rather strong measures in dealing with the opposition, but he wasn't a man who delighted in it. He was not a [Heinrich] Himmler. First of all, he didn't have the power; his power was derived. But I always thought that he would make a fascinating character in a novel if I were ever to write a novel.

G: Do you know what became of him?

J:I think he's living in England. He would be an interesting man to talk to.

G: I think [Nguyen Van] Thieu is in England.

J:Thieu is in England, yes, a few miles outside of London. Madame Nhu is outside Rome.

G: Yes, I heard she was--

J: You ought to make a trip overseas and talk to these people.

G: You came back, then, from Vietnam and published your findings.

J: In 1961.

G: In 1961.

J:I went to Germany in 1962 and then was involved in other things in 1963-64. In 1965 I became deputy assistant secretary of state for public affairs. And that sort of threw me back into the Vietnam thing in the information side of this problem. I think by 1965 everyone concerned knew that there was a problem, a problem of explaining to the American people what the hell we were doing and why we were doing it, and a very strong feeling among most of the people involved that we weren't doing a very good job.

G: Where did this feeling arise?

J:I don't know where it did arise. I think that if one were sitting in Washington and reading the newspaper every day, the ***Washington Post***, the ***New York Times*** and so on, I think the conclusion would have been inescapable that the Vietnam problem as seen by the President of the United States and the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense was not one that was being readily transferred to the American people, that many, perhaps most, Americans had great reservations about this whole thing. Add to that the fact that by 1965, one was beginning to get a rather strong reaction, even though our involvement in Vietnam was relatively minimal, a strong reaction on the campuses of the American Republic. College students having meetings, teach-ins, and so on and so on, largely critical of policy and of what we were doing, and so when you looked at all of this, one had to say, "We're not doing a very good job of explaining what we're about, why are we in

Vietnam, why is it important, why should we be investing these kinds of resources, both economic and physical, and human, in this bloody situation." And I think that by then it was clear that there was a high level of criticism and that, therefore, we were not making our case.

G: And yet the case seemed simple enough.

J:Yes, it really did. I mean, to me it did, and I think to President Johnson and to Dean Rusk and to everybody else involved the case was fairly simple, that here was a small country trying to get along in the world, that was being subjected to attack from the outside. Two, that it was an area in which we had clear treaty obligations to come to the defense and protection of our friends and neighbors if they asked for it when they were threatened, and three, if we did not live up to that kind of obligation, it was going to affect our status in the world and the feelings of our allies and friends elsewhere. Well, [these were] fairly simple political propositions that one would have thought you could get across, and yet it wasn't getting across.

G: Why not?

J:Oh, God, I've puzzled about this so long and over so many years, and I really don't know why.

G: But it was perceived as a real problem?

J:Oh, I think so. Oh, yes, certainly by all of us who were involved in any way. I don't know, it may have something to do with the psyche of the American people and the last thing in the world I want to do is to become a psychologist and try to describe what the American people feel and believe and think. And yet I suppose all of us have strong feelings about what we as a people really do think and believe. I have always felt that, right or wrong, there would never be any question about dedicating our resources and our young manhood to the defense of Canada. I think there would not be too much question about doing it again in western Europe if push came to shove, certainly for the British Isles and for France and Germany, at this point. I think it's just goddamn hard to get the American people interested in any other part of the world. I think Scotty Reston wrote fifteen, thirty years ago or something, "You can get the American people to do anything about Latin America except read about it."

Now here is a whole chunk of the world that is at our back door, that is crucially important to us economically, that, if things went the wrong way, could be disastrous strategically, and yet there isn't one American in ten thousand who knows a goddamn thing about what's happening south of the Rio Grande River, or who gives a damn about it. You've got this disaster in El Salvador and Nicaragua and Guatemala and so on and so on, and for the average American this is a bunch of spics spitting at each other, and they just can't get excited about it, and "What the hell are we doing down there anyway?" Simple as that.

Now, transfer it to the glorious Far East, to Asia, that great mystery wrapped in an enigma. It would be bloody hard to get the American people excited about defending Japan or Korea. I think

with a little luck and with a persuasive president, we might do it, but as soon as you move southwest to Taiwan, to the Philippines, to Southeast Asia, it just gets more and more obscure, and how can you expect the Americans to get excited about it?

Well, I got excited about it because I thought it was crucial. I thought it was important for the United States that that part of the world be stable and have some chance for a free and democratic future. Also, I felt it was important that the United States keep its word, which we had given. But that doesn't play very well in Dubuque. What more can I say?

Anyway, we thought we had a problem, and we puzzled, and we debated, and we argued, and we tried to work out some way to get people who know out to the hinterland to talk about it and describe it and explain it. And we did all those things; we did all those things up the kazoo! I mean, we had hundreds of people scattered over the countryside from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, to Orlando, Florida, talking about Vietnam and what was going on and why it was crucial to us. And it didn't somehow get across.

If we had had a different president; if we had had perhaps different leadership in the Congress, if we had had other people talking about this or describing it in a more persuasive and effective way, I don't know whether that would have made a difference. It's possible. I've come to believe that Ronald Reagan could talk the American people into a crusade in Uruguay, for God's sake, but--

G: Well, he pulled one off pretty neatly.

J:Yes. Yes, and he may pull others off, but that shows you what the power of a committed and articulate and persuasive president can be. Lyndon Johnson was, I think, one of the better presidents of the twentieth century, but he was not persuasive and articulate on a mass basis. If he could have sat down for twenty minutes with every American, which would have taken 385 years, I'm sure he could have convinced them that what we were doing in Vietnam was the right thing. But we didn't have that kind of time.

G:In 1963, there was a profound debate in the administration over the viability of Ngo Dinh Diem as--

J: Yes.

G:--the head of a state in Vietnam. Did that debate reverberate in your office as well as in others?

J:Well, it reverberated in my office. It also reverberated in my mind because I spent a lot of time in Vietnam during that period. I went to Vietnam with General [Maxwell] Taylor and Walt Rostow, and I was spending almost all of my time talking to Vietnamese. And the *overwhelming* opinion of the Vietnamese, including many in Diem's government, including, I can say at this stage in history, the head of his intelligence service, was that something drastic had to be done. That is, the way things were going, no one in South Vietnam with half a brain could see anything but disaster ahead. What that meant was that we had to sit down with Diem and get him to change his methods. There were some of us who felt that if Diem were approached in the right way and if he

would get rid of his brother--get rid of his brother in the sense of sending him off to Rome as ambassador or Paris as consul-general or whatever--if he could get the bloody brother out of the country and his glorious wife Madame Nhu, "The Tiger Lily," that there was a chance of moving things in the right way, of gradually bringing Diem around to a more rational, reasonable approach to his own problems in government operations, in handling the economy and so on. If that were impossible then it would seem that continuation of the Diem regime was a lost cause, because there was just overwhelming opposition within the body politic in South Vietnam, and then something more drastic would have to be done, whatever that might be. As it turned out, there were people who suddenly jumped on the horse and put their feet in the stirrups and started riding, and for them the only solution was to get rid of Diem. Probably a mistake, although--well, I was in favor of having someone, and I had my own candidate, be assigned to sit down with Diem and have a real heart- to-heart, brother-to-brother talk about all of this and try to get him to understand that his brother was a disaster, and that his brother's wife was also a disaster, and that the way things were being handled was writing the markings on his tombstone and that something had to be done.

G: Who was your candidate?

J:I thought the only person who could have handled this with the necessary skill and with the necessary influence on Diem was Ed Lansdale.

G:Did you know that he was being considered for the job as ambassador to South Vietnam?

J: Yes.

G: How did you know that?

J: How did I know it?

G: Yes. Not too many people knew that.

J: I don't rightly know how I knew it, but I knew it.

G: Do you know why he was not named as ambassador?

J:No. I know that there was strong opposition to Ed Lansdale from various parts of the government, especially the Pentagon.

G: On what grounds?

J:I think there was a great deal of jealousy, and I think there was a great deal of resentment that Ed had operated as a military officer in the Far East for many years, and yet was a totally undisciplined person as far as Pentagon rules and regulations and standards are concerned, and that he was, from their point of view, a kind of loose cannonball on the deck. So I would imagine that there would have been a lot of opposition from that quarter.

G: Did you know him at this point?

J:I'm trying to think when I first met Ed. Well, I obviously knew him, but how well I knew him, I don't know. I don't remember the first time I met him. I think it was in 1961.

G: But you apparently had considerable respect for his clout with Diem.

J:With Diem? Yes. I think from what I had seen at that point, he was the only American I could think of who had real clout, real--not only clout but rapport, and one is as important as the other.

G: He was working on Cuba, I think, at this time primarily, wasn't he?

J:I think Ed was involved in Cuba--was it during the missile crisis or before?

G: I think it was before, after the Bay of Pigs.

J:After the Bay of Pigs. That's it. That's it. The Bay of Pigs was 1961, and it was immediately after that that Ed, I think, got involved in the Cuban thing.

G: Operation Mongoose?

J:Yes. Yes. I think the first time I met Ed in a Vietnam context was maybe 1962, and I don't remember what it was or how it was.

G:Do you recall what his feeling was about the viability of Diem at that time?

J:I think he was terribly depressed about Diem and the way things were going and so on, although later he professed to have been totally shocked by Diem's murder. Well, everyone was shocked, I guess. But he had been terribly critical of Diem, and I think I was rather surprised that, having heard Ed being so critical, that he should suddenly be so shocked that something drastic happened. But that's the best of my memory on that one.

G: He had been one of those who helped Diem become what he was.

J: Indeed, he played a crucial role in building Diem up and so on.

G: Did you recall any--?

J:But I don't think that his influence with Diem in, say, 1962 or 1963 was what it had been in 1957 or 1958.

G:Now, why do you say that? That's an interesting remark. What had happened?

J:Oh, I don't know what had happened. I sometimes think that absence makes the heart grow less fond, but, anyway, he had been away from Vietnam for a while. He had been involved in other things. I would have been very surprised if Diem felt the same way about somebody who had been sort of at his elbow day after day, week after week, month after month, as he did two or three years later when he hadn't seen the fellow for that length of time.

G:Yes. When the Buddhist troubles begin, and I guess about April of 1963--I think that's right--this was a public relations problem of the first order, it seems to me. What were you asked to do or called on to do in that relation?

J:I don't remember what I was doing in 1963. I remember following it and reading about it and saying, "God, what a disaster." But I honestly don't remember whether I was trying to do anything about

this or explain it or suggest things that could be done to make it a little more understandable or bearable or whatever. I really don't remember.

G:I guess the most memorable parts of that thing were the self-immolations of the bonzes, dousing themselves with gasoline and setting themselves off.

J: Yes.

G:Did you get any requests from the White House or State to put out an effort to sort of explain this or countermand it or neutralize it?

J:Well, I'm sure I did; I'm sure I did, but I really don't remember--I wish I had my papers from those days. In any case, I don't remember specifically being asked to do anything about it, although I remember those events very well. I remember the burnings and the pictures and so on, and it would have been amazing if I had not been asked to do something about it, but if I was and what I may have suggested is--I've got a whole stack of papers over there from that earlier, earlier period, and some of them may shed some light on this.

G: We'll have to take a look.

J:Because earlier, when we were talking about papers, I was thinking about the White House period, which would have been 1966 to 1968, but there may be stuff in there from 1963 to 1965 from the State Department days, that I haven't looked at for twenty years.

G:Let me throw something out here that may strike a spark, may not. President Kennedy gave an interview to I think it was Walter Cronkite along in September or October of 1963, and he was questioned about the situation in Vietnam, and he said, and I am paraphrasing, "I think with some changes in policy and perhaps personnel--"

J: I remember that phrase.

G:--that the situation can be salvaged." And everyone since has interpreted that as meaning, "If we get rid of the Nhus, maybe we can make things go again." Is that--?

J: I think that is exactly what Kennedy meant.

G: Do you?

J: I am sure that was absolutely focused on the Nhus.

G:What were the Nhus doing that was so easily focused upon as the problem? Why were they the bad guys?

J:I think brother Nhu at that point was really the *éminence grise* of the regime. I think that he was very active in controlling the police and police activities in arrests and interrogations and the whole bloody mix. Madame Nhu was detested by the old families, the old Vietnamese oligarchy, if you will, in that she was not a woman of great culture and she was flamboyant. She was--well, she looked like a street girl in the eyes of the rather elderly conservative families and so on. But they were blamed for almost everything that came up: false arrests, torture, imprisonment of people

who shouldn't have been imprisoned, and so on. It's the kind of thing, I suppose, that happens in most governments when the evil head of nepotism rises. I think you remember that under John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy was blamed for a hell of a lot of things that he may or may not have been responsible for, but anyway, it's a good lesson for political leaders: Never have your brother in the government. I think that there should be an absolute rule that brothers are *verboten*; let them do something else.

But in any case, the fact that Nhu was the President's brother and that he was wielding great power and throwing his weight around, and the lady was doing the same, and she was milking every high-priced store in downtown Saigon, and so on, it just added to the atmosphere, and they were just totally despised. A lot of Vietnamese in those circumstances felt, "If we can just get rid of those two bastards, everything is going to be fine." Which is absurd, but it was a strong feeling.

Let me skip to something because when we were earlier talking about the white paper, you said that it had not been well-received by some elements of the press, notably I. F. Stone--who I didn't regard as a member of the press, really--but anyway, you were quite right, but it had to do with the white paper which was written in 1965, ***Aggression from the North***, which was the second white paper that I wrote. That, too, was not a bad paper. It was a follow-up on the other one and sort of told what had happened since. The one mistake that I made, as I look back on it, was that in accumulating the appendices of evidence--I simply picked one guy that illustrated this and one guy who illustrated that and so on and so on, and I should have used a hundred. It would have made a very fat report, and it could have been done, easily, but I just thought, as a reporter, "Jesus, these guys are not going to read through a hundred case histories. I'll just take one example of a guy who was born in the North and who came South as a private, another guy who was born in the South and went to the North and then came back to the South," to illustrate the main elements of what was clearly an invasion directed by the North using all kinds of elements. Well, instead of using one guy or two for each case or type, I probably should have used forty or fifty or a hundred. This was the kind of thing that I. F. Stone and others of his ilk picked up on and said that the evidence was flimsy.

Unfortunately, when that was presented to the press, I was not permitted to describe it and explain it and answer the questions. It was handled by Bill Bundy, who didn't know a damn thing about Vietnam or about the report and the documentation behind it, but he was a good lawyer and an articulate fellow.

G: Now, you say you "weren't permitted"?

J: Well, I wouldn't [say that]. I wasn't asked.

G: Okay.

J:It was a government paper. It was a State Department white paper, and therefore a senior official--that is, the Assistant Secretary for Far East Affairs--should handle this, and besides, as is well known, he was a lawyer and lawyers are always competent to handle things like this more than most other people.

G:I'm not sure that the irony in your tone is going to come through in the transcription, but--

J:I hope it does. (Laughter) In any case, the presentation of the thing was botched. Botched by a friend of mine who was in an official position of authority but didn't know what he was talking about, I mean, didn't know the report intimately, didn't know the back-up material, couldn't say, "This case illustrates this type, but there are fifty other cases that are of the same category, namely one, two, three, four, five, six, seven," which I could have done. But it wasn't done, and so I. F. Stone and others made mincemeat out of the presentation.

Is that clear? (Laughter)

G:Oh, yes. Did you ever have an opportunity to make this case to Mr. Bundy? Did you ever go to him or have the opportunity to say, "Bill, I wish I had been there," or--?

J: I was there.

G "Bill, I wish I had had a chance to open my mouth."

J:I told him, "I wish to hell when the first difficult question came up you had turned to me and said, 'You wrote the report. What do you say about this?' And you never turned to me; you never asked me a single question."

G: What did he say?

J: He said, "Well, I'm sorry. I probably should have done that."

G: "Probably"?

J: Well, a lawyer hedges his statements very carefully.

G: I see.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II