INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Colby's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2

G: Mr. Colby, when you arrived in Saigon in 1959 how efficient were our intelligence-gathering efforts concerning the insurgency?

C: Not very, I would say. We primarily depended upon the Vietnamese authorities and worked with them in collecting information about the insurgency. There wasn't very much insurgency at that particular stage. The 1954 collapse of the French had been followed by a period of internal turmoil wherein [Ngo Dinh] Diem finally took over. He consolidated his position by about 1956 and was engaged in a very vigorous economic and social development program at that point, which was proving quite successful. The communists basically had gone into a holding pattern in 1954, believing that Diem was going to collapse. So did most of the rest of the world. The communists had withdrawn some fifty thousand of their people back to the north. They had put their networks into a state of stay-behind--suspension--and there really wasn't much problem.

The government had become a little heavy-handed in some of its political activities. I've forgotten what they called the Democratic Front or something that they had, the National Revolutionary Movement.

G: Denunciation of communism or communist forces?

C: That was about 1956, 1957 really, and that had kind of dropped down by the time I got there and there wasn't much evidence of it. It was more a propagandistic effort, not so much in deliberate intelligence targeting. So quite frankly our intelligence effort at the time was focused on an appreciation of the political situation in Vietnam and the relationship of Diem to the various opposition political elements, a limited interest in the old sect problem, and all this was unilateral American attention. For any coverage of the communists we basically worked with the Vietnamese authorities, who really hadn't developed much capability by that time. In the summer of 1959 there was an attack on an American installation in Bien Hoa, in which I think one American was killed. This brought attention to the fact that there still was an insurgency. It came as a bolt out of the blue. It was hard to identify too clearly where it came from and who started it. But this alerted things and began to stir things up.

Then the really critical thing was that in the fall of 1959 and during 1960 there was a clear increase in communist activity, marked by a series of terrorist events, by the beginnings of infiltration, primarily of southerners back from North Vietnam, not northern forces or anything like that. And [there was] a gradual increase of the insurgency level, which culminated in November or December, 1960 with the announcement of the establishment of the National Liberation Front and what amounted to a declaration of war by the North against the Diem regime or the American Diemists, as they called it, trying to identify their cause with the cause of nationalism, and trying to

stress a continuity between that effort and the previous effort against the French. This then led to an increase in our attention to the insurgency problem, primarily reflected in an attempt to increase the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese intelligence services: training programs, assistance to them in their operational activities, liaison with them, some financial assistance to some particular projects, things of that nature, development of the central intelligence organization to centralize the information of the variety of Vietnamese police and military and other intelligence services.

G: Was our relationship more or less harmonious?

C: Oh, yes. We had good relationships with the Vietnamese. They were aware of our fooling around on our own, I'm sure.

G: Is this what you would call the unilateral--?

C: Yes. They were reasonably understanding of the fact that we were going to do it. But they dealt with us on the subject of operations against the communist problem and the beginnings of attention to the North and to try to get some assets in that area. They worked with us very straightforward, very decently, and they then did some things on their own, of course, which is not to be unexpected. The government intelligence services were interested in the opposition movements and what their activities were and so forth, and they penetrated them and to some extent controlled them at some times.

G: Was [Ngo Dinh] Nhu heavily involved in these activities?

C: Oh, yes. He was the President's counselor, by name, but with a kind of a general charter in the political area. He had been interested in

the so-called Can Lao party. He was impressed with the concept of a secret control party, an application of the Leninist doctrine of the role of the party within the structure of the state, as a centralized feature. He rejected the communist approach in the sense of the totalitarian, but he was interested in the French Catholic philosophy of personalism as an attempt to find a rallying ideology for South Vietnam to contrast with the ideological appeal of the communists and their call for revolution. He wanted to revolutionize Vietnamese society, which he considered as a corrupt inheritance from the French. He wanted to establish an authentic Vietnamese ideological base for a new society and the rejection of the old, primarily Catholic elite, replacing it with this new dedication.

His line of thinking changed while I was there. I don't know, I might have had something to do with it in the last couple of years. Because he had primarily thought of this Can Lao party as this control element and it being what Lenin would call the vanguard of the revolution, with the ideological fervor and control of the machinery. By the time he got well into the strategic hamlet program he had pretty well abandoned that approach in favor of the more theoretical elements of the strategic hamlet program, which was an attempt to re-establish a Vietnamese community from the smallest population grouping, the hamlet, and develop the leadership and the sense of cohesion in that community and then build the rest of it up from there. Now you see that is different from the Can Lao concept.

G: Are you saying then that instead of creating a political elite from the top down, he was building from the hamlet up?

C: He changed, yes, and was thinking in those terms. Now of course he couldn't explain it all that well. A lot of the old people--he railed against the old bureaucrats all the time and complained about them because they really had been indoctrinated in the French technique of the elite running the place in a kind of a colonial way. Trying to get across to them that they should stimulate the growth of a force which would replace them was swimming upstream, obviously. They could adopt the philosophy of personalism, the earlier approach, a lot easier than they could the concept of building a whole new elite from the bottom, from the rural masses particularly, whom they really rejected as unlettered peasantry, which a great deal of them were.

But Nhu saw that they had to establish this as a real basis for a new Vietnamese society and that was what preoccupied him. His exhortations went over the heads of most of the colonels and generals and civil servants that he talked to, but he was convinced if he just kept pounding at it he would be able to get this thing moving and it would develop a momentum of its own. He secured Diem's support and interest in the idea. Diem was always a much more pragmatic fellow--he had great faith in road-building and practical physical things as bringing about change. Schools, aid stations, provincial hospitals, things of that nature, industrialization, a change of some of the agricultural patterns, this is what Diem thought was the basis for the modernization of Vietnam. So there was a dichotomy between the two brothers,

Diem being the pragmatist and Nhu being the theoretical fellow. I thought both of them had something to offer, frankly, without having to choose one or the other.

G: Let me ask you about another personality who is a little shadowy, but he crops up in important places sometimes. He is, if I have the pronunciation right, Mai Huu Xuan. Did you have any dealing with him?

C: A bit, yes. Mai Huu Xuan was a general as I remember and took over as head of the police at sometime during that period, I can't name exactly when. I don't have a very strong picture of him. I was not all that enthusiastic about him. I had the impression that he was playing a double or so game. Not with the communists, but sort of a personal interest, aggrandizement financially and otherwise. In that way he was really out of tune with what was being worked on.

G: I have heard it asserted that once when Xuan was recommended to Diem by an American adviser for some post or other, Diem said he didn't trust Xuan because Xuan had once been in the Sûreté, and he said once in the Sûreté always in the Sûreté. Have you heard anything [about that]?

C: I don't know. Both Diem and particularly Nhu were very hypersensitive to French influence. After all, they had fought their way to position against the French, when the French thought that they could dismiss them and get rid of them. So they kept seeing French influences here and there, you know, some one is a French agent, this sort of thing you'd hear all the time. I'm sure some of it may have been true and I'm sure some of it was a kind of exaggerated McCarthyism, finding the

conspiratorial hand of the French in what otherwise was explainable by self interest by individuals, by independent action by French planters and things of this nature, businessmen, without any great guiding hand of the French government in that sense. The French as a cultural phenomenon in Vietnam, yes, that was what they were concerned about. They would refer to it as the French, and they were always very suspicious of that involvement.

G: Did we have any notion or any evidence that there were any sort of French intelligence activities to speak of?

C: There were French intelligence activities, but I don't think they were any more complex than our own, I mean a few contacts with various friends that would give you an independent reading of what's going on, that sort of thing. But as the French stage-managing the development of Vietnam, no, I didn't have that sense at all. Actually, of course, the key to Vietnam was that the French had really supported opponents of Diem during the struggle for power in the mid-fifties. And he defeated them. They first supported the chief of the army, and one of Diem's first moves was to fire him, and that caused quite a tremor at the time. But once he got a hold of the army and his own men in charge of the army, then he moved against the police, which was the corrupt Binh Xuyen. When he got those under control, he moved against the various sects, and the French had connections with all of these, of course, for years. Their technique of running the colony of Vietnam, which it was, was the usual kind of relationship with all the

different forces in the game, and not having it unify as a Vietnamese nation because that would get out of their control.

So Diem was correct in being suspicious of the French. I think he found their hand in places it probably didn't exist. Nonetheless, his problem was right. He had to establish a Vietnamese nation. The really key element of the Diem role was his feeling that he had to establish a Vietnamese nation. Otherwise he was always subordinate to Ho Chi Minh, because Ho Chi Minh had captured nationalism in the struggle against the French. Then they had been so impossible to their non-communist allies, including killing some at various times, that Diem said that there is a role for the non-communist nationalist. He then wanted to represent non-communist Vietnamese nationalism. This was frequently the problem of dealing with Diem, because sometimes he had to assert his independence even to convince himself that he was independent. Not so much to convince anybody else sometimes, but to show that he, by golly, was the leader of an independent Vietnam, dependent upon American support, appreciative of American support, all that sort of thing, but not subject to puppetry. Of course the communists, the Vietnamese words they used always were that they were struggling against the My Diemists, the American Diemists, which to them was all one word. They were trying to assert that this was just puppetry and that they really did represent nationalism. This was what the major struggle was about between those two groups.

G: I want to come back to that issue of Diem's asserting his independence,

because I think it enters the picture a little bit later on in this series of questions I have here.

I think you may have answered almost directly a question I have about the nature of the insurgency when it became apparent that there was something more than isolated terrorism going on. There is an issue involved concerning the origins of insurgency. One school of thought has it that Hanoi is primarily the engine behind this. Another school says no, it's southern-inspired, southern-directed, and Hanoi-supported. Is it necessary to take a position on these?

C: I would say all of the above quite frankly. The point is that obviously there was a feeling of resistance, of insurgency, rebellion in the countryside against the French elite who held power in the country, the French-trained, French-developed, French-culturally attached elite. There was a resistance against them, and there were abuses by them. There was corruption and things of that nature by them. So that you say, well, there was a base of rebellion, yes. Would it have gone anywhere without North Vietnamese assistance? No. It really would have stuck where it was, as a low level of problems here and there, localized problems and so forth. It really would not have gotten anywhere.

The key development was the 1960 determination to infiltrate the people who had been taken to the north. You see, in 1954 a provision of the Geneva Agreement said that you had three months in which a Vietnamese could choose whether he wanted to go to the North or the South. Some nine hundred thousand came from North Vietnam to the

South, primarily but not exclusively Catholics. Very little noticed at the time, some fifty thousand, roughly, went to the North, primarily young men, taken out of the various networks that had struggled against the French. They went to North Vietnam. They remained in training camps preparing for the day to go back to liberate the rest of the country from the My Diemists now, or the French toadies and puppets, to continue the war.

G: Was this in the nature of a contingency plan, because didn't the North expect the South to fall like a rotten apple?

C: Yes, and then these people would have moved back to assume the positions of authority and administration for the country. They would have been southerners who could relate to the southerners and move back in as the leadership element of the effort, of the combined nation, of the unified nation.

G: Let me propose a thesis to you. Diem's anti-communist programs between, say, 1954 and 1958, were so effective, it has been said, that the southern stay-behind communists went to the North and said, "If you don't support an armed insurgency, we're dead, and we're going to do it whether you're going to support us or not, because we don't have any choice anymore if we want to survive. It's that simple." Does that sound at all plausible to you?

C: It could have happened. I'm not sure that the program of the government was all that efficient, but certainly the communists weren't going anywhere. They may have gone up to the North and said, "If you don't do something, we are dead." Because what was really happening

was the total social and economic regeneration of South Vietnam. That's what happened between 1956 and 1959. I went to little schools out in the country being dedicated down in the swamps of Ca Mau. This one, I remember going to it, it was way out along the canal and they were dedicating this new school and it was one of those ceremonies that there are too many of. I've been through them forever. But the interesting thing about it was I asked about this little village where the school was. Well, the village had been evacuated during the period of the war and in about 1952 or 1953 had been just evacuated and everybody gone. About 1957 or 1958 they had re-established the village and people had moved back to it. Then with the government program of assistance to schools and training of teachers, they were re-establishing this school in this little village. It was way out, ten miles, fifteen miles something, from the provincial capital. I went to the provincial capital, to the office of education there, after having been there and looked at their map. You know, they had a comparative map of the number of schools they had in 1954, which was about two or three, all in the capital or the district capitals, and the number of schools they had in 1959--this was in the spring of 1959--which was in the order of thirty or forty in the province. Now, that had happened.

G: Did you verify that?

C: Yes. There's no question about it, that that had happened. In other words, there was a revival of the economic life. You saw it in the rice production, for instance, totals, the increase of rice being sold

and so forth. A variety of things of that nature were going on. The land reform that's been criticized, the land reform did take the land away from the French owners, and very substantial quantities of it. The program of industrialization, building up a little industrial zone around Saigon, the program of moving some of the refugees from the North up into the Highlands and giving them areas to develop and so forth, I think several hundred thousand actually moved, which had its double effect because some of the Montagnards didn't like their moving in and that sort of thing. But nonetheless, the country had an enormous amount of momentum.

I thought that one of the critical things was the election which occurred in I think about August of 1959 for the National Assembly. This was the second election. And the question was, what would this election represent? Would it represent a step toward participation, or would it be a facade operation, just by rote. It wasn't going to be an American election no matter what, I mean there's no question about that. You didn't have two parties, couldn't have them and so forth. But the rather interesting--we got a report one time--I don't know where we got it, haven't any idea--that the communists were putting out the line that there are various candidates for these electoral posts. Now let's select the more liberal of the candidates and throw our support behind him or her as a step toward getting some influence in the electoral bodies. Not that they would put their own candidates up under their own names. They wouldn't have been allowed to, quite frankly. But the question really was whether the communists

were thinking that they had an alternative to move toward an influence on the political decision-making.

Well, the result of the election was that the government party won 100 per cent of the seats or 99.9 or whatever it was, and it was just the worst form of manipulated facade. Now, Diem would have won the election by at least 80 per cent. There's no question about it in my mind at that time. But particularly his minions all wanted to show that their province turned in the highest possible percentage, and so they just went out and went through the motions and so forth. And of course the communists' conclusion out of this was, no chance. No chance of playing a role, and we're being crushed by the momentum of the government, by this positive momentum of the economic and social development that was in the process. And I think that led them to the decision, we've got to go back to the war. Otherwise we've lost it, and we've not only lost it in South Vietnam, we may lose it in North Vietnam as well. Because it was going through its terrible problems of land reform and not getting anywhere and stagnation and all the rest of it. I think that's really--now, some people say they were compelled to undertake the fight. Well, they were compelled if they wanted to take South Vietnam, and that they had no hope of taking South Vietnam if they let the natural processes go.

G: How were relations between Diem and the American Mission at the time you arrived?

C: Well, moderate. I go back to my point about his nationalism. He felt that he had to be <u>the</u> president. He felt that he had to resist the

American tendency to dot every i and cross every t, and that he had to make decisions himself. His government as a whole was not very efficient, because it was full of the bureaucrats. Nhu was absolutely right on that. There were some pretty impossible people there. But nonetheless, it was a typical underdeveloped country trying to get itself going and trying to develop a new generation of leaders for the future, and so forth.

The Americans are pretty overpowering when they get there in large numbers and have a major role. I think there was a feeling of the Vietnamese that they had to somehow distance themselves from the Americans.

G: How many Americans were in country about that time would you say? Have you got any estimate?

C: I'd say there were--well, they were mostly in Saigon. Let's see, there were about three or four hundred military, something of that nature. I would say there were a good two or three hundred in the embassy and probably another five hundred or more in the AID. So I'd say a good thousand or more, all at a reasonably high economic level, and occupying essentially the role of the French governor general and his staff in the earlier days. In other words, to a Vietnamese the transition was between French and American to some extent, depending on how we behaved and what our role was. I think this led the government sometimes to resist us, you know, and struggle against too much dictation. And of course the American idea would be the only way to solve a problem, and when the Vietnamese weren't smart enough to do

it our way, why there was something either venal or stupid about the Vietnamese, rather than searching into why they take the position and helping them to come around to the right decision, why don't you just see that this is the smart way to do it?

G: A sort of a knack or technique of dealing with people, which is what's involved?

C: Yes, well, you know, it was written up as the ugly American syndrome. It's a misnomer of the novel, but nonetheless, it's what it's all about.

G: Was there a difference between Diem's relationship with, let's say, the ambassador on one hand, and the chief of MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] on the other?

C: Well, now you get into personalities. The MAAG people normally are quite supportive of authority and take their orders very straight. Military do; that's their tradition. And their effort was to strengthen the army, which was necessary to Diem's survival, and he was very sympathetic. He also saw the value of having a very supportive American military in their influence in Washington, and therefore he made particular gestures to the military. The way we set up our governmental machinery, the CINCPAC command line was independent of the State Department command line through the ambassador. I happened to disagree with this, but it's a fact of life. The United States military had a somewhat autonomous position vis-a-vis government policy and government authority. This is what changed when Ellsworth Bunker got there later. He made it very clear that there was only one

line of command, and so did [Creighton] Abrams, and so did [William] Westmoreland. There was no doubt about it in their minds. But in the earlier days this concept of the separate chain of command did exist and it created problems. It allowed the Vietnamese to play one off against the other a bit.

Secondly, the civilian approach was focused on economic improvement, the military on the military, and very few people [were] interested in the political development. The ambassador's role was to react to the pressures he got from Washington to try to generate more liberal governmental procedures. The press began to talk about the corruption and the abuses and so forth, and the ambassador's role would have to be to try to move the government towards better imagery in that respect. This then put him in conflict frequently with Diem's concept that you've got to hold a strong line of authority here, or your whole thing will come apart. And yes, we're building a new structure and base for our government, but we're not going to do it next week, and we're not going to do it by giving it away to some of these liberal opposition groups in the Saigon area who have no base in the countryside, none, and who are just a pain in the neck and have no real political force and really don't understand what we're trying to do in this country in terms of building it and strengthening it. They're talking about loosening when it needs to be tightened and aimed toward a very significant objective. This was the philosophical difference between particularly our political and State Department approach and the Diem and Nhu concepts.

G: With the benefit of hindsight, would you say that one of the problems that Diem created for himself in this context was the failure for some kind of loyal opposition to achieve viability, to sort of defuse dissent?

C: Not really. I think the real problem was that he allowed the negative images to grow without adequately presenting what his philosophical effort was and what he was actually accomplishing in the country. Because a more vigorous program of telling the world, telling lots of the world, what that was about, he didn't do very well, frankly. It wasn't our role to do for him unfortunately because then we get in the position of trying to influence our own opinion. That was not our function and we can't do it and shouldn't do it, but it certainly was a function that he failed to do very well. Therefore he let the issue grow as to whether Vietnam was democratic enough, rather than the issue grow as to whether Vietnam was progressing. Because if the latter had become the main issue, then I think he would have had support. But there was no way, no way in the world in which he could retain the necessary authority and go through the liberalization technique.

There are a number of interesting parallels between the fall of Diem and the fall of the Shah. In both cases the really critical thing is not the absence of an opposition within the country, it's letting the issue become one of whether there should be a democratic society there or whether it is making major progress at the cost of a democratic society. Now this year is the hundredth anniversary of the

birth of Ataturk. Ataturk is generally conceived of [as] having had a very positive impact on the history of Turkey and the Turks themselves. He modernized the schools, he took the veils off the women, he took the fezes off the men, made them wear western clothes, tried to force them. Exactly what the Japanese did in the Meiji restoration, a total modernization, forced draft, with some roughness around the edges. Well, that's exactly what the Shah was doing and did. In fact, the Shah's positive accomplishments in this field probably outweigh those of Ataturk, in terms of education and social change, modernization, technological investment and all that sort of thing. And Diem was engaged in the same program of modernization, in that sense.

You really have the three models. Whether you do it with that a kind of semi-authoritarianism, which was the Shah, Diem, Ataturk, Meiji. Another one is Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-Kuo in Taiwan, successfully. The South Koreans, the Japanese, so forth. The second model is the concept of totally programmed disciplined development. China, North Vietnam, North Korea and so forth, a little bit Burma, things of that nature. A total disaster. In the range of history it hadn't worked. And the third is the Indian model of as much democratic relationship as possible, with the retention of some kind of a development program, rather dramatized and so forth. They have succeeded in it, and they're one of the few that has, frankly.

G: What do you ascribe that to?

C: In India?

G: Yes.

C: British background.

G: That's interesting.

C: The British heritage. The heritage of each of the European and Western nations in Asia is fascinating. In the British colonies you find a good police force, a concept of law and order, and a concept of--and I mean law as well as order--and a concept of development in neatness and so forth, a degree of momentum, and an acceptance of some sharing of power. In the American colony, ex-colony, the Philippines, you find an enormous success of mass education, a total focus on a chaotic political structure--which almost brought the country down before [Ferdinand] Marcos took it over; now the agony of how they're going to go is very much upon them--and the kind of politic that we have, the politics of the western states you might say in the 1880s, which are kind of noisy and there's corruption and violence and all the rest of it, which characterized the Philippines. And [there is] some good engineering and private investment and so forth. The Dutch left almost nothing. They took everything they had. The Belgians in the Congo left three native doctors when they moved out of that huge country. And the French left some good engineering, a terrible bureaucracy and good cooks. (Laughter)

G: What about the education system the French left behind?

C: Not much. It was mainly elite-oriented, which is the way French education is in France. It's heavily elitist-oriented. If you make it, fine, but if you don't you're down there in the blue collars. And the French educational system was heavily carried by the Catholic

church, and that had its own implication, because after fifty years of that it was obvious that a high proportion of the educated elite were Catholic. Even though the Catholics hadn't insisted that you become a Catholic in order to be trained, there was a natural effect in that direction.

(Interruption)

G: We've discussed Diem's reform, progress-minded activities. How good were our estimates on such reforms as land reform, the agrovilles and so on?

C: Well, the land reform worked according to the way most of the successful land reform programs had worked in the past--the one in Japan, the one in Taiwan, various others--in which the government took the land from the larger landowners, and particularly the French, and then loaned the peasant the money, which he then repaid over the next few years. Now the communists very intelligently focused on that as just a way of insisting on further payment of taxes. Because during the intervening years, the years of the war, there were no taxes collected because the back country was in a turmoil and in an uproar, and so the peasants weren't paying any taxes. So that the interpretation successfully put forward by the communists, which was in a sense accurate, was that this legal mumbo jumbo meant that the peasants would be required to pay taxes today that they hadn't been required to pay before. Now, we hadn't come through the thought process that led to the later land reform program under [Nguyen Van] Thieu, in which the individual was given the land without a requirement to repay. In

other words, we were still thinking in terms of the Taiwan, the Japanese, and some other models, which had been successful and certainly were successful in those areas, but hadn't had a local competition the way the Vietnamese one had.

G: Weren't there charges--perhaps not at the time but later--that the land reform was really too much of a facade? That landlordism was still very prevalent?

C: The point there is that whatever the maximum size of holding was set at--I don't know, let's say a hundred hectares or something like that, I think that's what it was, which is two hundred and fifty acres, which is quite a lot--too large. And we went to Diem at one point saying, "Well, you know, you've really got to cut this down and make it smaller, because there were still landlords and you still had landlordism." His response was very interesting, as again, the politics is the art of the possible. He said, "You don't understand, I cannot eliminate my middle class." When you think of his position at that particular time, what he was saying was the same decision he made in 1954 to 1956: I'm going to use the apparatus of social order that exists in order to conduct this longer-term transition. And I'm not going to dispense with it and try to create a new one in a hurry.

Now the interesting comparison is with Ho Chi Minh, who moved into Hanoi in 1954 and eliminated every other apparatus of power: the land reform program, which killed a certain number of the landlords; the bureaucratic apparatus he threw out and sent down to the South and so forth, but at least he started with something new. Now he wasn't

under attack for the next few years so he had the period of respite in order to build this new structure of control, party control. Diem at the time was controlling the precincts of his palace and not much more when he first started. His problem was how can I get control of some of these forces that are anarchic and going in all directions? He needed allies to do it, and he picked up the allies as he went along, including the bureaucracy and the army and various other things, and put them under his control.

Now by putting them under his control--Nhu explained this very clearly, he knew exactly what happened--he became a captive of it. Then his policies then had to be transmitted through these mechanisms, which were not very good. That's why Nhu used to always be railing about them, but I don't think even Nhu thought that there was a real alternative. He didn't have the opportunity to create a new structure ab initio under pressure. Now whether he should have done more of it in the period of 1956 to 1959, something of that nature, yes, I think probably they should have. He had his heart set on the National Institute of Administration, the idea of building--which was advised by our Michigan people and so forth--a new cadre, an Americanized cadre of governmental bureaucratic civil servant category, as the French did after World War II when people like [Valery] Giscard D'Estaing went to the Institute there to become inspectors of finance, and gradually worked their way up. That's what Diem was in the process of doing and it just was too slow for the pressures that came on

him. So the answer [is], yes, he should have had a different base of power.

G: But what was there?

C: That's the point. What was there? There wasn't any at that time. He didn't really have that much alternative, because if he had not reached for those allies he would have gone down, there's no question about it.

G: Now the communists in the North and in the South always claimed that their base of power was the peasantry, particularly the landless peasantry, and I think with a good deal of truth. How did Diem's agroville program affect the attitude of the peasantry?

C: Well, the agroville--I'm glad you separate the agroville from the strategic hamlet, because they're two different things. The agroville program was one of these theoretical programs which might have worked in a different circumstance. It came about because of the nature of South Vietnam and the Delta area, which is a whole series of canals and the people live sort of one-by-one along the canals and stretch out for miles. In 1958 and 1959 when Diem was in this program of developing schools, aid and marketplaces, just the general social and economic structure for the country, it was obvious that this was really a tough thing to handle. How do you handle a school, and particularly a high school, if people are scattered all over the place? So he had a thought that if he could move people closer together to make them into agrovilles, still agriculturally based but in a kind of a city rather than a village or hamlet structure, that

that would give population base for a hospital, a decent administration, a school system, not only primary but high school system and so forth. And this looked fine. Move the people together and then give them these amenities, these steps toward modernization and organizing and so forth.

Now of course you couldn't separate--they depended mainly on their rice growing for their livelihood. That they could go out to, no great problem. It's only a couple of miles, no great concern. But they needed something as a plot for vegetables, things local, a pig or something like that, something they could have for their family development, aside from the main cash crop out here. So, the consequent design was--I've forgotten how much, but let's say a hundred square meters or something like that, which the house was this much and the rest was this garden patch that they could use. Well, that meant, in other words, that [there were] ten families a kilometer square. It spreads kind of far. There is still accumulated enough so that they can support these various economic things. And in a world in which no opposition had occurred, this would have worked, at least it might have worked. Let's give it a half and half. It's worth the experiment and certainly might have brought about these things.

The problem was that this launched in about mid-1959, just about the time the communists were deciding it was time to resume the rebellion. Well, when you spread this ten families per kilometer you obviously don't have a defensible center and so an enemy patrol can walk right through the whole thing and there's no way to put up a

perimeter that will defend that entire area. This was the Achilles heel of the program, that it came in, would have gotten going about 1960 at exactly the time that the insurgency was arising and making it fruitless. All this stuff about moving graves and all the rest of it, sure, that's a part of the problem, but if it had developed some economic momentum, I suspect it would have overcome that. But what it couldn't overcome was the deliberate effort to destroy it by the enemy and the inability to defend it.

G: Was it particularly vulnerable to enemy propaganda as well as attack?

C: Oh sure, I mean, being moved and so forth. But that sort of thing I think is something you take as the first stages, and then you demonstrate that there's something there and you can turn them around. In a later period we went through the same problem. But by sticking to your program and making it appear that it's working, people do look and say, "Yes, it does make sense."

G: I'm anticipating here, but it seems to me that are you saying in fact that you took basically the same idea later in CORDS [Civilian Operations Revolutionary Development Staff] and made it work?

C: Not the agroville, no, no. Because the agroville thing was indefensible. It was a little too much the political scientist at work, with a single idea. That's why I can't say that it would have worked, and I can't say that it would not have. I just don't know. What the changes were I have no idea. But the fact is obviously it didn't work and the reason it didn't was its vulnerability. Not because the other things failed, it was because it was just too vulnerable at a time

when the insurgency began to rise. I don't think it contributed in any major degree to the rise of the insurgency. I think it had other bases and other reasons and that it might have worked if it had had a chance.

What I am saying is that we essentially took on the strategic hamlet program later and made it work, and of course it's my contention that the strategic hamlet program basically worked the first time. And I know I'm a little contentious about this, and I know the stories about the fake barbed wire and all that sort of thing, and sure, so did Diem. We had some internal reports given to him by some inspectors that he sent out, which were reporting to him the fact that some provinces were cheating on the figures and that there was abuse of the peasantry and all the rest of it. This wasn't a surprise to him, that his machinery was keeping secrets from him, because he had those reports, we know of it. Those are the problems you have when you take on a major program and try to make it work. In some places it doesn't work and you go out and tinker with it and fix it. That's the purpose of having that kind of independent inspection and reporting and so forth about the vulnerabilities and the abuses and the wrong things that happened, so that you can correct them. That's the whole idea of the thing. And the fact that you get these reports doesn't mean that the program is no good. If you just let it go, yes, then the program is no good. But if you then fix it, and fire somebody or change the program in some area to match the problem or whatever, which he was gradually doing.

G: Were we getting those same independent reports?

C: Sure. Yes.

G: Well, why were we accused later of swallowing a lot of Vietnamese false statistics on such programs?

C: Well, because we love statistics. You know, if we want statistics, they'll give us statistics. If that's what you want, fine, we'll give them to you. Nhu was never very much interested in the statistics. He was all lost in the theory up here, and I thought he made a certain amount of sense in that, in trying to put the thrust on that. He would have an all-day meeting of all the province chiefs. I remember being there one time, dragging them in from all over Vietnam and giving them a long talk for three or four hours. And a lot of them came out kind of mystified as to what it was all about, which I think had less to do with his not having a clear idea of what he was doing than their inability to translate it into the kind of staccato, one, two, three, I put ten strands of barbed wire and it's all right; if I only put eight it's no good. Because he was stressing that what you were interested in here was a political movement, a political action to generate a sense of community on the part of these people, not to wrap barbed wire around them, but to get them to take a role and a pride in what they're doing and in participating.

I think he was right, and it was essentially that philosophy that we returned to later, there's no question about it. We translated from the hamlet to the village. I think that was a mistake in the Diem-Nhu time, of stressing the hamlet. Because the hamlet was not a

traditional organ of administration. Nhu had that as part of the philosophy. He didn't want the traditional power apparatus of the village to be running it. He was forming this new base of power for the whole nation.

G: Do you think that was a mistake?

C: Probably, that he took on more than he needed to at that point. In other words, he could have left the apparatus of power in the village pretty much alone so long as he gave it some power, because it has the ability to change and to refresh itself in a variety of ways. But once you get up to the national level it's very difficult to do.

G: A lot of critics, I'm sure you're aware, find very great fault with Diem for removing the local elected village chief.

C: Yes. And I think there--that's why I do think they probably did make a mistake in that respect.

G: I think Edward Lansdale in his book says that it was done while he was in country and for one reason or another he was never told or never found out and says that "you're going to find that incredible and hard to believe, but it's the simple truth."

C: Yes, well, I wouldn't be surprised. I mean Nhu felt no obligation to get Lansdale's approval on anything. I mean, sure, he talked to him and so forth, but he'd make his own decision on a thing like that. As I say, it's this philosophical reason I think to change the old elite and generate a new leadership. There was a theoretical idea. It may have been just a little more than the traffic bore at the time.

G: This is jumping ahead a little bit but it I think is a good follow-up to that. You mentioned Ataturk and several other models. Other commentators--I think Walt Rostow is one who says this is a very typical pattern, where you get an old traditional style of leader in the first generation of a revolutionary movement, and then the young technocrats take over in one way or another, Ataturk being the young technocrat. If what Nhu and Diem were trying to do was create a new elite, is it fair to say that the elite they were trying to create then turned on them in the form of the army?

C: Well, the army eventually turned on them, but that's another feature. I mean, we caused that, let's face it. No, I think the weakness was that Diem first started thinking in terms of creating a new trained elite out of the National Institute of Administration and so forth. Nhu later turned to this new idea of a new popular elite coming out of the villages. There's a contradiction between the two obviously. The beneficiaries of Diem's effort were the elites in the cities who were able to still be there and not be eliminated as they were in the North. They certainly turned on Diem, and they turned on him because of an idealistic feeling that he hadn't made things good enough and that certainly he had changed the old systems to their detriment, and yet had not solved the problems by his changes. Then they got intoxicated, some of them, by the idea that if we just have more democracy everything will be all right. I just don't think that would have been the case anymore than it was in Chang Myon's Korea in 1960 when the country started to come apart after Syngman Rhee. It was only rescued

by Pak Chung Hee putting it together. I think the same come-apart phenomenon would have occurred if Diem had been assassinated in 1960. In fact, he had that revolt against him, parachute attack, and he put it down. He had enough loyal troops to put it down. It wasn't the army that turned on him; those were a few excited paratroopers and a few local politicians. I think that he could control that problem.

What he couldn't control later were two things: one, the forerunner of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Buddhist bonzes that burned themselves. Because I think that's an exact forerunner, total rejection of the changes going on, modernization, an idealistic return to some religious base which, if you ever talk to any of these people you really see that it's all words and no content. I mean, very, very strange. Then the effect, however, of the Buddhist thing--again, I'm a little contentious about this because I believe that the Buddhist revolt, which blew up in June of 1963, had its major impact not in Vietnam but in the United States. When that picture of the burning bonze appeared on Life magazine, the party was almost over in terms of the imagery that was affecting the American opinion. That put enormous pressure on President Kennedy. "How can you possibly support a government that has people doing this against it?" [It] led to his vacillation, which is what I have to say it was in terms of what we should do about this problem, and then led to Diem's forceful suppression of the Buddhist revolt in the August raids. Frankly, I think he suppressed them in the same way that he suppressed the sects in 1955.

Now, the problem he couldn't control was the United States reaction. But the Buddhists were not a factor in September and October. The factor was the difference between the Americans and the government. It wasn't a matter of the Buddhists being a major problem in the countryside. They were not a major problem, and he had not lost the authority of his state. Sure, there were unhappy people, but he hadn't lost authority and he had been through tough challenges like that before.

The thing that really led to the revolt, of course, was the American signal, given by President Kennedy, that new personalities would be necessary. Our fight with them [was whether] to send Nhu and Madame Nhu--who didn't help at all over here, that's for sure, she had a terrible impact on American opinion--out of the country and Diem's refusal to knuckle under, as he would have said it, to American domination on that issue, and to demonstrate in part his independence and his belief that the Americans were wrong. [Diem had] the genuine feeling that the Americans were making a mistake and it was up to him to struggle hard enough against them to prevent them from doing so. Then that led to the big fight in Washington that occurred all that summer as to whether we'd go with President Diem or think of replacing him--you know as much about that as I do--and eventually ended up with a few signals by the administration, a statement by President Kennedy, suspension of our commercial import program, the assurances to the generals that we would be prepared to resume it if they moved against the government.

G: What was the generals' original complaint against Diem?

C: That he was creating such confusion in his programs and in his policies that he was risking American support of Vietnam against the communists. That was their fundamental feeling, that he was going to lose the war because the Americans were going to back away.

G: I see. It's been contended that they were saying he was botching the effort against the communists, rather than alienating the Americans.

C: Right. Those are the two arguments. I mean, you can pay your money and take your choice. But the one argument was that his policies, particularly vis-a-vis the Buddhists and the authoritarian nature of the regime, was antagonizing the people, therefore giving encouragement to the communists to develop more support among the people and therefore threatening the future of Vietnam, and that we could never hope to win the war against the communist attack with Diem. A lot of very sincere people believed that.

The other argument was that the countryside was essentially unaffected by the whole Buddhist struggle and that in fact the programs of the countryside were going along. I happen to think that that is a little exaggerated because I think the really critical thing that happened was the outburst of the Buddhist revolt, which turned the attention of the palace away from the strategic hamlet program, which until that time had been quite successful, but required an enormous amount of palace attention and stimulus and drive. When the Buddhist thing blew up and then the fight with the Americans developed, all of that stimulus and drive had to be diverted onto the other

problems. The program was let lag at exactly the time when the communists had identified it as a major threat, in the spring of 1963, and had instructed their people that they were to destroy this program at all costs, because it really did threaten them strategically. So they began to attack it in about June or July, and you can see the terrorist incidents grow at that time against it. One interpretation is that this was a reflection of the disenchantment with Diem. The other is that it was an expression of communist strategic focus on a dangerous program. I take the communist direction as the key element. I know these are arguable, and I don't mind. But the fact was that they wouldn't have had a revolt if the United States had not encouraged it. There was no doubt about that whatsoever. I think it's the greatest mistake we made. I know Mr. Johnson also thought it was a terrible mistake, but vice presidents don't have much power.

G: This is speculative, of course, but do you think in the face of the opposition Diem was experiencing from the Buddhists and the unrest in the army and so forth, could he have been sustained through that crisis?

C: Oh, yes. Yes. If the Americans had maintained their commitment, their support, no doubt about it. But when the Americans indicated a change, then bing, it was gone, it went.

G: Where does this put Roger Hilsman?

C: Well, I think Roger and some of the others, and [Averell] Harriman I disagreed with on various [things] at times--I just think their assessment of the problem, of the nature of the problem, and the

policies that we followed were mistaken. Now I must admit that they weren't entirely free in that because they had a lot of pressure behind them from the American people and the American press. That's why I say, when that picture appeared in Life magazine, the game was almost over. Because we do have a government which has to reflect strong attitudes by the American people. That certainly had a strong element, a strong impact on the situation. Now I'm not one of those who believes that you can ignore the American people. You cannot. You've got to listen to them. You've got hopefully to educate them as to what the reality of the problem is, but they are the ultimate repositories of power, and when they decide something it's done. And it was done with Diem on that image, and it was done with Vietnam on the Tet image.

G: A case in point perhaps--

C: It's a bad way to make decisions maybe, but nonetheless, it's part of our government system.

G: That's going to lead us into an interesting discussion on the role of the media, I think. I don't know whether we'll get to it.

An interesting, I think, case in point, and I'd be interested in your evaluation of it, was the raid on the Xa Loi pagoda in August, which brought a lot of things to a head.

C: Sure.

G: Nhu, or Diem, whoever was operating, apparently used Vietnamese special forces to suppress a focus of Buddhist discontent, and the press

made a great deal out of this, because it was well known that they were CIA-supported, advised, whatever.

C: --supported, yes.

G: Did we know about this in advance?

C: No. No.

G: How was a person like--or why, I should say, was a person like David Halberstam supposedly informed ahead of time and we didn't know? That's raised a bone of contention.

C: I didn't realize he says he was informed ahead of time.

G: Well, not much ahead of time, I think a day or so ahead of time.

C: I never heard that statement either. Oh, frequently newspapermen get a tip on things that the government doesn't get. The fact that we have an adviser with a unit doesn't mean that we're privy to every order they get. I mean, when Pak Chung Hee moved into Seoul in 1961, some of the American advisers almost were with the unit, not realizing what they were involved in. You know, you're a foreigner and the orders come down that chain. We didn't have resident advisers with every battalion or whatever structure. It wasn't a very large force anyway, it was a small force. They could have easily used them and told them to go do something without telling us, and probably would have, because they knew we would have objected.

You see, in the raid on the pagodas, Diem I think came to the conclusion that he had to suppress the Buddhists. As I said earlier, I think he succeeded. But he came to the conclusion that they were not just a religious force, but a political force that was attacking

the authority of his state, and he had no choice but to suppress them. He used the special forces, because he happened to have them, they were handy and easy and he didn't have to explain them to a whole general staff or anything, just reach out and tell them to do it.

G: Didn't he make an effort, or someone make an effort, to pin this on the ARVN rather than on the special forces?

C: Well, that was the fuss that we got into afterwards. I think, as I remember it, the question was whether the army had participated in it. They had army uniforms on. And then the army had always been unhappy about the special forces having a separate line of command to Nhu's structure. That's why they eventually shot Colonel [Le Quang] Tung in the most outrageous murder of all, frankly. A very mild, straightforward, decent guy.

But the army then, with the reaction, you see, of the Americans to this, the army insisted this wasn't army. [Henry Cabot] Lodge took this point up and made something of it, and at a time when we were building our contacts with the army and wanted to maintain that option of the army, then that became important. You see, quite obviously Diem and Nhu took the interregnum between [Frederick] Nolting, that they did respect and realized that he was losing the battle of supporting them and had been kicked out obviously and replaced by Lodge, who was a very unknown quality at that point. They didn't know which way he'd go. They thought they'd take the interregnum between those two ambassadors and just eliminate the Buddhist thing and present Lodge with a fait accompli, that it had been eliminated, wasn't there

anymore. Well, Lodge is not one that takes that kind of a gesture lightly and this affected his entire attitude towards him.

G: Did Lodge interpret that as a challenge, an insult perhaps?

C: No, it--well, that they deliberately had acted before he got there in order to just do away with the Buddhist problem before they had the problems of dealing with him.

G: That brings up an interesting point concerning the--

(Interruption)

There is an interesting series of blank spots and conjectures concerning their relationship right before the coup, between Lodge and General [Paul] Harkins, the MAAG chief, and Mr. [John] Richardson, the station chief of CIA. Can you sort that out?

C: Well, Lodge came out to Vietnam having been chosen, as the former vice presidential candidate for the Republicans in 1960, by President Kennedy, in order to de-politicize our problems in Vietnam and get the Republicans on the hook as well as the Democrats. As I said, this challenge to his authority by Diem and Nhu affected Lodge's entire approach.

Harkins, in the MAAG position, was convinced that the war was going relatively well, not perfectly, but moving along. The programs actually working of improving the armed forces and the strategic hamlet program seemed to be in the right direction and so forth, and that the Buddhist problems were some political thing that were off in a corner and shouldn't affect our main interest in the support of the South Vietnamese and the war effort.

Richardson, by direction and by tradition, was in direct touch with Nhu, had talked to Nhu over the, what, year and a half since I'd left, and had a frank relationship with him, understood what he was talking about and trying to do, and basically sympathized with the concept of a political, hamlet-based solution to the insurgency problem. That we also shouldn't be diverted by the urban, religious problems from our main interest in the major challenge to our interests there, which was from the North.

Lodge came in with much more of a sense of the American reaction to the Buddhist problems and the intensity of feeling in the United States, much more aware of the sharp difference of opinion within the administration as to what ought to be done, and probably a little better informed about President Kennedy's basic thinking, that something had to be done about Diem and Nhu. So he came in after the raid on the pagodas, determined to distance himself from and distance the United States from total identification with Diem and Nhu. This, of course, conflicted with Richardson and Harkins' view of what was important and what was the significant element of the problem, which was the countryside problem. This led eventually to his dismissing Richardson in order symbolically to indicate the end of the relationship with Nhu. Because Diem was not yielding to Lodge's demands, and they were demands. Diem was not yielding to those demands. The chemistry between the two didn't work at all.

One of the more wry aspects was one of Lodge's first cables when he got there, and he went to some ceremony at the palace. Diem had

appeared in a traditional Vietnamese mandarin's coat, and I guess the other people there, too. Diem, for a long time, had adopted the sort of French white sharkskin suits that all the bureaucrats did, and then increasingly he turned to putting on a traditional Vietnamese costume. Lodge's cable is rather amusing because it talks about the medieval court with all its connotations. Of course, the really fascinating thing was that when Lodge finally left Vietnam about a year and a half later, he put on a Vietnamese costume for the final ceremony--

G: Lodge did? That's interesting.

C: --at which he was given the National Order. The contradiction between the two has never really been explained. I mean, Lodge was a very strong-minded, a very forceful fellow, but. . . . As I say, the chemistry was never going to work in the circumstances unfortunately.

The other thing is that Lodge did not conceive his role as being the manager of the American effort. He conceived his role as being an individual sent out to make his observations and make his contribution. As a result he did not try to manage the American team in that sense and assert his authority--it sort of went its different ways.

G: Was there a manager below?

C: Well, Truehart was there, but if the ambassador isn't going to insist on authority nobody else really can successfully do so.

G: That brings up a story that I have encountered in another context, and that is that following the Diem coup--I think it's in December--Secretary McNamara went to Saigon on one of many visits and came back and reported that in fact there had not been leadership of the country

team, as it were, but that he had great hopes for a young man named David Nes, who was going to act as a coordinator at the second echelon level. And about a month later David Nes got the sack. Do you know anything about that story?

C: I don't remember, but I think it was a question of whether Nes was posing some threat to Lodge's basic authority. I don't know the story, but I think that was the guesswork.

G: I've heard the same thing. That's as far as it goes.

C: See, the history of the American effort in Vietnam was a continuing agonizing effort to get the Americans organized for the nature of the war we were in. We went through all these awful problems of the struggle between the military and the civilians, and the different civilian agencies and all the rest of it. We actually put the strategic hamlet program under pretty good management when we sent a fellow named Phillips--

G: Rufus Phillips?

C: Ruf Phillips, Ruf Phillips there to run the American support of the program. While we didn't unify the military side of it, it really wasn't all that relevant at the time and it wasn't a major problem. Then, of course, we got into the total confusion of the whole coup and the post-coup. That was just anarchy.

Then we tried a series of experiments to at least get the civilian Americans organized. Bill Porter went out there and various other people. That sort of moved it a little bit. It wasn't until President Johnson put Bob Komer in to "damn it, get this civilian side of the

thing organized," that he came up with the answer. Secondly, they sent Ellsworth Bunker out there to be the commander--Ellsworth took charge, no doubt of it. Komer had the brilliant solution of unifying the civilian and military countryside effort under a military command. That solved all the problems. That the military had a unity of command, but the civilians had their own role in it and the joint organization and all the rest of it. It worked. But it wasn't until President Johnson finally made that [decision and] put a guy with Bob's enthusiasm and drive into the role that it eventually worked.

G: I've seen two schools of thought also on the effect of the coup on the communists, not just the communists, the NLF, which is the more inclusive term, I think. One view is that militarily the Viet Cong made great strides taking advantage of the confusion and the falling apart of the strategic hamlet program and so on. Another view is that politically the NLF lost its focus for a while because it no longer had Diem as a symbol of everything that was wrong. It was no longer the only anti-government game in town; there were lots of anti-government games you could join if you wanted to play.

C: That's interesting.

G: And that about a third of the members of the NLF went inactive or simply quit in the aftermath of the--not in the aftermath, in the summer during the Buddhist troubles, and for sometime thereafter the NLF lost considerable numbers, not necessarily fighters.

C: I have heard that interpretation. I would say that the effect on the NLF and the communists generally--well, one communist diplomat, I

think he was a North Vietnamese, but he was part of the whole business or NLF, one or the other, said they just looked with absolute amazement at the fact that the Americans threw Diem out, couldn't understand it.

Secondly, there was a surge of attacks to destroy the strategic hamlet program, which of course the new government couldn't identify with anyway. So they did take advantage of that period of confusion, and period of very weak leadership under the junta, Duong Van Minh particularly. His only decisive act was to decide to kill Diem and Nhu.

G: Do you think that was Minh's decision?

C: Oh, personally, yes, without any doubt. In fact, the other generals I think were shaken by it.

G: Who do you think pulled the trigger, or is that important?

C: That fellow that was killed later.

G: Xuan?

C: Yes. Yes, whatever his name was. Because when [Nguyen] Khanh got in he just took him out and shot him. I think--there's no doubt about it, Xuan killed him. There's no doubt about that he was Minh's aide and that he acted on Minh's orders, no question about it. The other generals then were faced with a fait accompli. They couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again unfortunately. But then they floundered around for three months and the place was coming to pieces and Khanh moved and took over.

But the communists were not, interestingly enough, equipped to exploit the confusion to the degree that they should have been. In

other words, they did not have the structure, the size force, either political or military, which would enable them to move into that period of vacuum. And so after a surge to get rid of the strategic hamlets and this great new world that's opening up, then the rather grinding business of the day resumed and the military in the countryside just sort of toughened up and said, "well, we've got to fight these guys, keep on fighting them." The communists, NLF, continued their effort. And it did take them a little while to rejigger their political line, but it didn't take long. I don't recall that as being any great problem.

G: I noticed in researching documents that--the ones that I have at least--show a focus on political matters of the CIA cables coming out of Saigon immediately after the coup. And it has been speculated that this was because the CIA's jurisdiction, if you will, in military matters had been taken away. Or was this simply a question of priorities?

C: This was priorities. The main problem was the political thing of whether they could put something together. The countryside reporting had been taken over in great effect by the military. I mean, they had the province teams by then, I don't know, maybe not. They had theater teams. And a lot of the statistical stuff of numbers of incidents and stuff like that, that flowed in through the mission and was available to CIA, but they didn't report it as something they discovered or found. I'm sure that the CIA cables said something about the war and how it was going at that time. But you're right, it did focus very

heavily on the problems of the politics of the junta and then Khanh and then the Buddhists and all the other actions that were going on there. Because that was the name of the game.

G: What responsibility did the CIA retain after I think it's called Operation Switchback, for reporting on things like order of battle and so forth?

C: Well, it wasn't Operation Switchback that did that. You always had a military intelligence component to MAAG. They got the statistics from the Vietnamese military. The CIA would get some statistics from the police, but the military were more comprehensive on the military actions and fighting problems and so forth. The Switchback merely got CIA out of an action responsibility with respect to the CIDGs [Civilian Irregular Defense Groups] and the northern operations and things like that.

G: Operational programs?

C: Yes, the operations. They didn't change their function. But CIA never felt that it was its job to provide comprehensive statistical reporting. That was the Mission's. Its job was to try to develop some useful sources in both the government, the opposition elements, and to the extent feasible using the police and the intelligence structures, civilian intelligence structures, to get into the communist side. And then of course after Switchback we in theory got out of the whole action area and then, oh, six months or a year later it was obvious that the place was coming apart and that we needed local forces and local political counter-insurgency kinds of forces. CIA began to come up with some of those and got the approvals to support

them and get them going. That was the RD [Revolutionary Development] cadre and some of the other programs.

G: I want to come back to that, but before I do I want to ask a related question about statistics. This is very controversial.

C: Are they right? (Laughter) No, the answer is no, they're not. But it doesn't matter, that's not the problem.

G: Well, trends I think were [inaudible].

C: Yes. Trends could be right and comparisons would sometimes be right, even though the absolute figures are not.

G: Are you familiar with a Harper's article written by a former CIA analyst by the name of Sam--

C: Sam Adams?

G: Sam Adams.

C: Yes.

G: What was your opinion of it?

C: Well, the thing is, Sam Adams--I've testified on this--came over or was here, I don't know which, and at that time most of the reporting on the war was coming through the military channels and was stressing the military objectives and the military enemy. The order of battle was in military forces, what units and what their strength [was] and so forth, and I gathered added up to something like 300,000. Sam Adams made the obvious point that "Look, there's a lot more than the military over there. There's a political problem, and that's part of the problem. We really have to account for that if we're talking about the enemy." And he was absolutely right on that. He kept talking

about it. Then he made the second step, which he said, "Well, now we have some evidence that this political element in three villages is so strong. Therefore you multiply the number of villages by that and you get the estimate of 600,000. Therefore there are 600,000." People out in CIA said, "Whoa, wait a minute, You're absolutely right. There's something more than the military. But you can't make that kind of a logical jump. What you're talking about is some lady who once in two weeks hands across a piece of paper. Now is she a one or is she a one-fourteenth, or what is she?" Because you're dealing in something that isn't quantifiable, in those comforting terms that the machinery wants. So they had a big fight in the National Estimate about it, and the final estimate says that there are this many main force and this many local force and this many guerrillas force units, which add up to about 300,000. Then it says, "and there's an additional unquantifiable number beyond that."

Now Sam makes the argument in some of the things that he says that the military were told that the figure couldn't go over 300. Therefore they fought against this other thing. The analysts out at CIA say they couldn't accept Sam's methodology for coming up with the 600 and consequently the estimate sent to the President does specifically mention the unquantifiable as an add-on to the military force estimate involved. And that they thought they did their job honestly and decently. He still says, "Well, it still ended up with only 300 and that's what the orders were," and so forth. That's what the argument is about.

G: I see. You don't think there's anything to this business of the military analysts being told who to count?

C: I don't know what the military were told, or somebody in the military. But I know that the people in CIA were not subject to that order, and if they bought the 300 they had a reason for buying it, other than some general telling them that 300 is the top limit. Because if they had been told that, they would not have necessarily accepted it.

Tape 2 of 2

G: We were about to--

C: About the [Maxwell] Taylor-[Walt] Rostow thing.

G: Taylor-Rostow mission.

C: In 1961 Ed Lansdale came out--well, the end of 1960 I guess, shortly after the President's election, President Kennedy's election--came out in, I guess January. He was preceded by the rumor that he was possibly going to be the new ambassador.

G: I've come across that several times. Was it serious? Do you know whether it was being seriously considered?

C: I have no idea. I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Obviously he had some background, and he reflected a little bit of that counter-insurgency, political action kind of role that was certainly popular in the Kennedy circle. He was very suspicious of the CIA station I know.

G: I think you refer to that in your book, that he was sort of stony-faced through the briefing.

C: Yes. Yes. But eventually I think he came around to--and his own political good sense brought him around to understand what the

Vietnamese were trying to do with the strategic hamlet thing. You know he didn't buy Nhu a hundred per cent but he did understand that they were focused at the real level of the war, down in the villages and hamlets, and that that turned out to be a good thing. Then he went away. He didn't become ambassador obviously. I've heard the story that somewhere in the Pentagon they didn't particularly look forward to that, his being the ambassador on top of the various military chain of command who was over there, whoever it was at the time.

Then, of course, the really important mission, though, was the Taylor-Rostow one, in October or something like that. It came over for about three of four days. Unfortunately I was not there. I had been called over to Manila to meet John McCone, our new director of CIA. I had just come back and had about a half-hour talk with Rostow, and that's all. I've always kind of regretted that, because I had the feeling that the Taylor-Rostow mission, in its report that eventually showed up, did not put an adequate stress on the importance of the strategic hamlet, the village level of the war, the whole counterinsurgency role, but instead really started us off on what I thought was the wrong foot, of focusing particularly on the military and the strengthening of the military.

G: And pressures against the North for a possible--

C: Well, and all that stuff about the North, which was kind of incidental. We'd already been doing a little of that, but I was in the process of becoming disenchanted with it as not being very feasible.

G: These were what, black operations?

C: Yes. Dropping people in and so forth. I guess we ran our first ones in 1960, so it was before that. But--

G: Hadn't Lansdale trained some teams way back in the middle fifties?

C: Oh, some of his people had theoretically left some capabilities up in Hanoi when they went away, but no, it played no role at that time. Lansdale was more symbolic. He was looking for the symbolism and the political effect of this, and not unreasonably. Some of his ideas are a little fey once in a while, but he did understand the basic political quality that was necessary to any continuing struggle.

But the Taylor-Rostow thing I thought really missed the point at the time. I really was always sorry that I hadn't had more of a chance to get to them on it. I don't know why. I don't know whether it would have made any difference, but I didn't. They kind of dismissed the CIA as, well, you get off and do a little of that intelligence work, and that's all. I thought that the CIA at that particular point had figured out some of the things about what the nature of the war was all about. Particularly a few of the experiments in the villages where we'd armed some of the local tribesmen or local citizens in the Delta or up the coast or up in the mountains or some place.

G: How did Diem feel about arming the population as opposed to arming something like the self-defense force?

C: He was a little suspicious of it, but Nhu convinced him that it was a good thing. And they didn't just wander through the back countryside and throw the guns out the back of the trucks. I mean--Diem of course

had no hesitation in arming a Catholic community because he had confidence that they would fight, and they did. There's no question about it. But he went along with the effort up in the tribal areas and he went along with some of the other programs, which were more experimental that anything. We deliberately conducted them as experiments, and then tried to demonstrate to Nhu the things that had worked and the things that hadn't about them, and that the key to it was the local leadership and the local sense of responsibility. I think he got a lot of the strategic hamlet out of some of those experiments. Then he broadened it and applied it, and then he put the philosophical gloss on top of it. We certainly made mistakes in some parts of it. I don't have any doubt about that. But as an identification of the correct strategy for that kind of a war, I think that the CIA people were on the right track at that time, and that the Taylor-Rostow mission went in the wrong direction.

G: That, of course, nearly confirms a question I think I had asked on the handout, which was, is it too much to say that you think the CIA had the secret to winning the war and didn't get a chance to apply it?

C: Well, I covered this in my book a little bit, that there is an inherent problem here, that CIA is an agency whose machinery works through secret channels. And you can't really win a war secretly. So somehow we had to figure out--and it took us a long time to do so--how to organize a proper political counterinsurgency effort outside of CIA, with CIA playing a role. Now eventually we came to it with CORDS, but it took us about five years to figure out the structure. In the five

years we went through all sorts of noise and confusion unfortunately. But as a strategy, yes, I think there's no question about it, that the strategy of focusing on the village level of the war, encouraging the participation and activating the local population to play a role, was the key to the nature of the war that they were facing. And the strategic hamlet program--I don't care about little variations in the programs, I mean, village, hamlet, things like that are minor variations against the basic philosophy--did work in 1962. Wilford Burchett said it did, and he's no friend.

G: That's quite a compliment.

C: And it did work in 1969, 1970 and 1971 once we got at it again. And when we chased around in other areas it didn't work.

G: But something like it worked in Laos?

C: And somewhat comparable in Laos. Laos was a little different in that there you had a foreign invader with only token Pathet Lao participation. And the CIA activity primarily was involved in the hill tribe areas rather than in the lowlands, although we did have some programs in the lowlands in central Laos. There it was a matter certainly not of the Americans doing it, but of supporting the local people who had a reason to fight the enemy who was coming in and pushing them around. Supporting and helping local leadership, not taking the direction of the affair in our hands, but giving the local leaders the support, the logistics, the transportation, the communication, all that sort of thing, advice, to the extent they wanted it. And it certainly worked.

The fact was that for the first several years in northern Laos--I mean after 1962.

The interesting thing about Laos, of course, is that we began to have a crisis there in about 1960. The North Vietnamese, the Soviet air force was there, various Soviet presence, and the Americans on the other side. We and the special forces both identified the problem of going up into the hills and working with the tribe. We sort of had two or three different programs running at the same time, which is normal for Americans. Unfortunately we seem to have a terrible time to get ourselves organized across civilian and military lines. But it was moderately effective.

Then President Kennedy and Mr. Khrushchev decided that they didn't want to have a crisis in Laos, they had too many other areas and that wasn't a very convenient place, and that if we would make a deal that we just wouldn't have a problem there. We made the Geneva agreement and we all [withdrew]. The Soviet air force withdrew and we withdrew our white star teams and the special forces and all that. The only ones that didn't comply were the North Vietnamese. They resumed the process of suppressing Northern Laos. At that point we wanted to maintain the Geneva agreements because of the relationship with the Russians, and therefore we couldn't overtly violate the agreements. So we asked CIA to give the tribal the necessary to help them, so that we wouldn't either be in a situation where the North Vietnamese could thumb their noses at the accords and do what they wanted. So CIA was constrained in the number of people it could have

and in the techniques of its operations. Now the Russians knew darn well we were doing it, but so long as it didn't become a publicly announced policy it was all right with them. They kept an embassy in Vientiane until the very end, ten years later while we were carrying on this fight.

G: As long as these things were deniable it was--

C: It's all right with them, yes. Yes, they understand this kind of subtlety. And we still didn't want a Soviet-American confrontation in Laos. That we didn't want. So the Soviets decided that they would just turn a blind eye to it, and they did. Well, the effect of it however was an enormously effective operation. We developed a force of about thirty, forty thousand men, fighters, we trained them. For the first two or three years, of, sort of 1963 to 1966 or 1967, we were the guerrillas and they were on the roads in northern Laos, and they were suffering the same problems that our forces were suffering in South Vietnam for a while.

G: I think you say in your book it was a mirror image of the Vietnamese situation.

C: Yes. Then gradually we regularized, had to, because they increased their forces from seven to seventy thousand over the years. And we gradually developed battalions. We never developed anything bigger than a battalion but we developed battalions. We did develop some U.S. military attaches, which provided some artillery advisory, assistance. Then we developed a whole bunch of Thai volunteers that helped out there and so forth. So we ended up with a force of about forty-odd

thousand I think, but two or three hundred Americans, and that was it. Air America did a magnificent job, but it was not a combat air force. It was a pure transport, that's all it did was transport. The combat function was carried on by the Lao air force, which about 1969 or 1970 we began to support very substantially with the T-38s, I think they were called.

G: T-28s, I think.

C: T-28s. And they did an extremely effective job. It was an interesting marriage between the airplane and the guerrilla. The Royal Lao Army never did anything. It stayed totally in the valleys, never played any part in the fighting that went on for all that time. We had victories, we had defeats. The victory in 1969 was when we drove them out of the Plain of Jars and captured an enormous quantity of North Vietnamese equipment. I've forgotten what it all was, but huge quantities of it. Toward the latter days we were taking a pasting because the communists were really being very forceful about their attacks there, and we were having a tough time in some of the period.

But the fact was, we ended up with an agreement which was just like the 1962 agreement, that we would all withdraw ourselves and leave Laos neutral and independent with a coalition government, which had also been a part of the 1962 agreement. And we had prevented the North Vietnamese from working their will over ten years at a tiny cost, certainly in Americans. We lost about four people as I remember over the ten years. Because our people were told they were not allowed to participate in combat. The Laos certainly had losses, no

question about it. The North Vietnamese had, too. I don't think there's any doubt but the Laos wanted to fight and the tribes wanted to fight, about ninety or a hundred thousand of them in Thailand today who left the country as a result. And of course the North Vietnamese cheated on the agreement again, after the 1973 one, just the way they did earlier, but this time we weren't asked to help the Lao stop it. Was it right to have helped them? Yes, I think so. They wanted to keep them out. I think it was important to our strategy, whether it's military, political, whatever, that the North Vietnamese not be allowed to work their will in Laos the way they wanted to over those years. We had some operations in South Laos, somewhat similar, not quite the same type because it's much more thinly populated. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, we tried some raids on it, but it was kind of the incidental. Finally the air force took over the Ho Chi Minh Trail problem.

G: Did you furnish any intelligence for the air force reconnaissance [inaudible] along then?

C: Oh, we had some spotting teams for a while, but sometimes they got more in the way than they were helpful. Because if a spotting team was in an area, you had to bar that area from being bombed. Sometimes the air force would rather go hunt the target and bomb it themselves and pick it up with their machinery, you know. I mean, we knew where the roads were. Teams weren't giving us all that much.

G: What about the later program with sensors? Was that any part of your doing?

C: No. That was the military.

G: That was strictly an air force program?

C: Military did that. Yes.

G: I don't want to leave the tribesmen just yet, because there are a couple of things I wanted to touch on concerning them. One of them was played up quite a bit in the press, and that had to do with the fact that this part, I believe, of Laos was famous for being the center of the opium traffic.

C: Oh, yes.

G: Did this create any problems for us?

C: Sure. Well, not just this part, but the whole of northern Laos and Burma of course of the last, what, hundred years, since the British forced their way into Canton in the opium wars, 1850, roughly.

G: Or forties.

C: Forties, yes. You're a better historian than I. They've had that golden triangle, and certainly the tribespeople up in the north were always involved in it, and the Meos and others were part of it. Were we part of the thing? Certainly we didn't go as our first priority to eliminate the growth of poppy seeds. We kind of ignored it. Later we tried to wean these people over on to other forms of livelihood. For instance, we brought some Brahma cows up there. We brought some various kinds of crops and tried to get them into those and so forth with indifferent effect. We made a point that we would not be involved in the transport of any of this stuff, and we did successfully, I think, keep it off our airplanes. [There were] a couple

minor incidental exceptions where we caught guys with it, you know, a personal pack or something of it.

The real source of the opium problem was down in Vientiane, with those Lao generals. Those were the ones who were the big operators in the opium trade, and the connections they had in Vietnam to circulate it to our soldiers. After it became a problem with our troops in Vietnam, then it obviously became a matter of higher priority to us. At that stage we did begin to put a much greater emphasis on operations against some of the traders, and particularly gathering intelligence on where some of the factories, you know, whatever you do to it, distilling things are and so forth and attacking them. We finally pretty well drove most of that over to the border of Burma and then developed some assets there that would tell us when caravans were coming. Then we pushed the Thai into going out and meeting them and clobbering them and so forth. And yes, we had an impact, a negative impact on it. But the business of our being involved in supporting the opium trade is absolutely hogwash. It's just not so.

G: Well, I. . . .

C: And incidentally, this is not just me talking. This was investigated by a committee of the House of Representatives in about 1972 or 1973, Lester Wolff I know was--who was no patsy for anybody--he sent some investigators out and looked very seriously at it and finally reported, no, the CIA was not involved in the trade. If anything, it was helping against it.

G: What about marijuana? Was that ever an issue for you to deal with?