

Victor H. Krulak Oral History Interview— 11/19/1970
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Krulak was a Lt. General, United States Marine Corps; specialist on counterinsurgency, and member of the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1962-1964). In this interview he discusses his earliest contact with John F. Kennedy in the Solomons, the Special Group (CI) on counterinsurgency, Robert S. McNamara, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., and Krulak's observations on Vietnam, among other issues.

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Archivist of the United States

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VICTOR H. KRULAK


ARCHIVIST OF THE UNITED STATES

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Victor H. Krulak

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Oral History Interview

with

LT. GEN. VICTOR H. KRULAK, USMC

November 19, 1970
San Diego, California

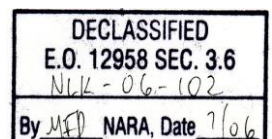
By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Now, if you would begin again with your earliest contact with John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] in the Solomons.

KRULAK: In the autumn of 1943 I commanded a battalion of marine paratroopers. Just before the Bougainville invasion, my battalion was directed to land at night from destroyers on the island of Choiseul, which is next south from Bougainville, and in the ensuing four days to behave like a much larger force attacking the enemy with as much vigor as we could to persuade them that we represented at least the vanguard of a very large operation; and thus to cause them to redeploy their forces from Bougainville or at least to divert their attention from Bougainville. The Bougainville operation was thus to be supported by this diversion.

The operation went off essentially as it was planned. We attacked the Japanese in a number of places, and their radio traffic disclosed that they were bemused if not deceived. The Bougainville landing went off on schedule. And we continued to attack the Japanese on Choiseul for another couple of days, feeling that there still was an advantageous opportunity. But the Japanese soon became aware that we were small, not big. There were five thousand of them and seven or eight hundred of us. We soon found, instead of being on the offensive, we were under attack. On one occasion following one of our raids the Japanese came at us in great force and one of my companies was obliged to withdraw under fire in daylight. I had



screamed for air support and PT-boat support. The aircraft came and the PTs came and they were Kennedy's division. They covered us as best they could. One of my boats ran on a coral head and wiped its bottom out. And as it was sinking, one of the PT-boats came along side and pulled the survivors out of

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the water. It was Kennedy's boat. They brought them back to the little base area where we were on the island of Choiseul and we reassembled there. His division's operations were probably the difference between success and failure in this little enterprise on that day. I felt pretty beholden to him. I told him that one day we would be together again and I owed him a bottle of whiskey and I'd see that he got it. I was thinking of our being together on the island of Vella Lavella where his squadron was based and where my battalion was in fact based.

Well, I was wounded and evacuated. I ended up in the United States and I never saw Kennedy to give him the whiskey. But I kept the bottle – Three Feathers it was, doesn't mean anything to you probably, but Three Feathers was just the most wretched rotgut in the world and one day I was going to give it to this fellow. You know, I sort of lost track of him, but I owed it to him, and one day I was going to give it to him. I kept it, and it followed me around in my chattels.

Then he got to be President and I was ordered to Washington. He sent for me and we chatted about the Solomons. I didn't bring the bottle of whiskey with me because I was, you know, sort of on my mettle. I wasn't going to do anything like that the first moment. But on another occasion I brought him the whiskey. Of course, he didn't remember that I had promised him a bottle of whiskey, but he knew the circumstances, and he accepted it with great enthusiasm. He said his problem would be deciding when to drink it.

MOSS: Is this the same bottle after all...

KRULAK: Oh yea, same bottle, same bottle of World War II Three Feathers. Pretty bad. Often, subsequently, we talked about our experiences in the Solomons and this

very, very hairy business where he did something very great for my people. This established a real nexus between us, although we had little time to talk about history in terms of oppressiveness of the Vietnam business. But it did, nevertheless, establish a relationship which made it very easy for me to talk to him when I wanted to; and I did. I made great use of it, I believe, in terms of opportunities to try and tell him the very complicated things that were on my mind as I learned about that odd kind of war.

MOSS: What do you recall of your impressions of him when he was in the Solomons? Anything lasting? Anything that stands out?

KRULAK: Just a very serious, nice guy, very serious.

MOSS: Okay. Now what were the circumstances of your being called back to the Pentagon. It was under orders. Was this something set up beforehand of your

particular expertise? Was the job created for you to do as it was needed or what?

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KRULAK: No. President Kennedy knew no more about the kind of war with which we were faced in Southeast Asia than many other people in authority although he had much more responsibility. But he did have the sense to say, "This is new and it is different and it is complex, and the military had better organize for it. What I want at every level, starting at the very top with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and going down through all of the armed services, is an organization for counterinsurgency. I want each of the armed services to designate a man, and I want to know his name. They've got to be people who have some competence in this sort of thing, to the extent that anyone has."

Well, I was selected to be the one at the top, at the Joint Chiefs of Staff level. When I talked to the President on my first visit he made no slight implication that he had selected me, and I do not believe he did. But he said he was glad. But I don't believe that he made the choice.

Why was I chosen? I'd spend a lot of time in Asia. I can speak some Chinese. I had the kind of small unit, low level experience that it was presumed was important here. I had written on guerrilla warfare.

Little did they realize that we weren't really talking about guerilla warfare; we were talking about political warfare. The reservoir of ignorance was almost unlimited. And we all learned together really, some more slowly than others.

MOSS: Yeah. How did the job develop? What kinds of things did you start out doing and what things did you find were important? What things did you find simply wouldn't do at all?

KRULAK: The first hurdle to get over was to persuade the armed services that this just wasn't more guerrilla warfare. This in itself was an almost Himalayan task. Some of them during my whole tenure were not persuaded. The second task was to try and pull together everything that was conceivably useful and codify it. I undertook to do this – to prepare a doctrine, which I did. I prepared a book called *Joint Counterinsurgency Doctrine*. It was an impressive thing, more volume than value, but it was a beginning. Then the project of making the armed services report to me what they were doing because I had to report it to McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], and with him, often, to the President. This was not easy because mostly they weren't doing much. But they gradually developed a head of steam in their boilers to the extent that it became a very respectable endeavor.

Then there was the question of education. Each of the services was obliged to undertake an educational program. The Army launched it very aggressively. The Army is characteristically good in educational matters, in school teaching, and in organization for education. They did extremely well, as a matter of fact, organizationally. The Air Force did well. The Marines fairly well. The Navy least well of all. Then there was the

matter of tactical organization. We undertook in my office to monitor the tactical efforts and developments of the various services: the SEAL [Sea, Air, Land] teams of the Navy and the COIN [Counterinsurgency] aircraft program of the Air Force and the Green Berets of the Army. This, as you may know, was a diversion of another function. The Green Berets, initially, were aimed at something quite different than counterinsurgency. They were aimed at behind the lines of inspiration of partisans. But they were employed for this purpose. All of these things were the functions of my office. But by all odds, the most interesting was my relationship with the Secretary of Defense and the President.

MOSS: With such interest on the part of the President and the Secretary, and you being in a position on the Joint Staff in effect, how much difficulty was there in that since ostensibly you report to the Joint Chiefs?

KRULAK: You're very right. Mr. McNamara has, as you may know, a great flair for straight line organization. In order to ease the pain, he just gave me another job, reporting directly to him. So I had two tasks, one task which was routine, the special assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for Counterinsurgency, and the other was – I've forgotten the title – but in any case it was responsive directly to the Secretary of Defense. So this immediately solved his problems with the Joint Chiefs and solved mine with the Joint Chiefs too. We never had any problem. The two chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under whom I served, Generals Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] and Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor], were most helpful; just the reverse of their being institutionalized or troublesome. I had difficulties within the Joint Staff structure occasionally, but those were wholly manageable and they didn't keep me up at night. I did work hard for McNamara with the State Department, with CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], and occasionally with some White House instrumentality on counterinsurgency. After all, we all started from an initial zero, and since I was putting my total time on it, I was learning faster than most of the rest of them. So I had a nickel's work of one-upmanship, only because of the amount of time I had to devote to it.

MOSS: I remember myself seeing at the time many books beginning to come out on guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency and that sort of thing. General Taylor is often given credit for being the catalyst with his *The Uncertain Trumpet* book: and Robert Kennedy is often mentioned as being a very active, interested person in the whole counterinsurgency business. What do you recall of the impact of these people?

KRULAK: I can tell you.

MOSS: Okay.

KRULAK: The catalyst was a thing called the Special Group (CI) [counterinsurgency]. It

met in the old State Building, the White House annex...

MOSS: Executive Office Building.

KRULAK: ...Executive Office Building – a real euphemism – every Tuesday afternoon at 2 o'clock. The members of it were the Attorney General, the Under Secretary of State, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Director of USIA [United States Information Agency], the Director of AID [Agency for International Development], the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and whatever Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman] was at that time, and that was it.

MOSS: How about Deputy Secretary of Defense? Was Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] involved?

KRULAK: Deputy Secretary of Defense. Forgive me. Yes, he was. Okay, I attended habitually as the representative of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For many reasons General Taylor, whom it was most of the time, did not attend, and relied upon me to attend for him. Occasionally I represented Gilpatric. But I attended one way or another every meeting as somebody's representative. They wanted it that way to my despair. It was hard work. It was sod breaking. And mostly people appraised the problem in their own words. Their words were quite clear to them, they meant something quite different to someone else, either in terms of time or scope or just plain meaning.

MOSS: What sort of things, for instance? Do you recall?

KRULAK: Take an example of time. Bobby Kennedy was by all odds the most powerful personality on the Special Group (CI), and he was the most impatient of all the members of the Special Group (CI). One occasion, the Defense Department was asked or directed – I don't know which would be the correct word – by the Special Group asked, I guess to pursue at high speed the development of a very light radio capable of penetrating the jungle canopy. Now, all of the amplitude-modulated type radios have great trouble with jungle canopy. Without a very heavy power source they can't drive their signal through the canopy. What Bobby was asking them to do was to achieve a not inconsequential technological breakthrough, but it had to be done. When the meeting was ended, and we went back to our affairs, there were few who realized that at the very next Tuesday he was going to ask, "How are you going? How are you doing?" And on about the third time, when he got no substantive response, he blew up, just blew into fragments. In a couple more weeks they had some hardware to show him, not created, but hardware that had been borrowed and brought in – one I think a CIA radio, I remember, another, a foreign one – to show not what had been done, but the magnitude of the

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problem. They still hadn't gotten around to solving it, only to appraising it. Well, he just went into orbit. He hated this. I give you this as an example of a distorted view on the part of

the various participants as to what was meant when something was said; in this case Kennedy's desire to have something done at once.

On another occasion certain decisions were made respecting police support in a Latin American country. Bobby said, "We need a report on our having done this, this, this, and this," several items. He turned to the Director of AID and said, "Could you bring in the experts to report on how you have fared in accomplishing these things?" The next week the expert was there, and his report essentially was, "I've taken your name and we're seeing what we can do for you." When he left the room, Bobby said to the director of AID, "Fire him." A very impatient man, but he had a very clear perception of the route that we had to follow, and he inspired the admiration of many, including myself.

MOSS: You say a clear perception of the route that had to be followed. How would you characterize that route?

KRULAK: The route. Okay. We had to learn; we had to equip; we had to train. We had to do them simultaneously, and we had to do them quickly. That was the route. He saw this. And he beat it like, just a drum, all the time.

MOSS: How about the other people on the committee, Gilpatric, let's see, Ball [George W. Ball] – I guess it was Ball by that time.

KRULAK: Gilpatric mostly wanted to be obedient and to be a good follower. I never saw him out in front with the flag. Ball mediated and moderated with sobriety and a great measure of decency. When Dave Bell [David E. Bell] took over as head of AIF, he exhibited more dynamism, a good deal more. Ed Murrow [Edward R. Murrow] had a pretty good feel for the magnitude of what we were undertaking to do, because his life was involved with propaganda. And he was perceptive, helpful. McCone [John A. McCone], well, I think he had an ambivalent approach to this whole thing. He probably saw the complexities of it a little more than most, and I'm sure it worried him very much that his colleagues were not quite aware of the terrible problems involved, because of his interest in covert activity. I don't believe he ever had confidence that this committee type approach was going to have the incisive results that were needed.

MOSS: How did you feel about that?

KRULAK: I was sure of it. I was sure of it. I felt that if a committee that responded directly to the President of the United States and upon which his brother was his viceroy couldn't make it, no committee on God's green earth could ever make it. And I was right

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I wasn't alone. All those who felt that way – like McCone – were right.

MOSS: As I recall, people got very, very enthusiastic about this whole

counterinsurgency business as being sort of a panacea to solve the problems. They really went overboard with the thing and built up more of a head of steam than could really be deliberately controlled. Is this fair or not? It's just an impression that I have.

KRULAK: It's not fair.

MOSS: Okay.

KRULAK: The reverse is more likely to be accurate. The enthusiasm, sincere enthusiasm, resided with a relatively few people, a relatively few people. Superficial enthusiasm, more visible, could be found almost everywhere, because when the big dog goes bow-wow, all the little dogs go woof-woof. And there was a lot of that. But there were those who did see through this and who were deeply and sensitively committed to it. I'm convinced, just picking them at random, these men saw the tremendous impact that could be found in a kind of warfare that aimed at winning the loyalties of people first and foremost: the President himself saw it, I'm sure of it; Taylor saw it. I'm certain of this; Cyrus Vance saw it, I know this. Let me see, who else?

MOSS: Paul Nitze?

KRULAK: No. William Sullivan, who is now back in Washington, he saw it and understood it.

MOSS: How about people at the White House? Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and Rostow [Walt W. Rostow], Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal], Komer [Robert W. Komer]?

KRULAK: Mike Forrestal understood it very well. Komer came to understand it more slowly. Bundy understood and supported. As a matter of fact, philosophically he realized the magnitude of the problem and its possible great virtues – of the whole counterinsurgency thesis – early on. But mainly the lip service outweighed the genuine dynamism, and that's not because people are given to lip service but because this was so different, so utterly different, that it took a while just to understand what we were talking about. Had to develop a whole new lexicon.

MOSS: You mentioned a moment ago the question of support to police in Latin American countries. How would you characterize that program in terms of effectiveness and the propriety of the thing which these days comes into some doubt, I think.

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KRULAK: As to propriety, no problem whatever. We went nowhere that our presence was not very much wanted, almost desperately. The Inter-American Police

Academy, which was conducted by AID in Panama, was attended only voluntarily by those countries who wanted to improve their police quality. It was made available, and they came and they learned. Now, how good the school was is a debatable thing. I think that relatively it could be described as a pretty good in terms of what Latin Americans learn about police from their own resources. I believe there was no impropriety. You must realize that in ensuing seven or eight years there have been tremendous changes in not only our attitudes respecting Latin America, but theirs respecting the United States of American. But at this time, there was no question of ramming it down their throat. Not at all.

MOSS: What about in a country where there was some political instability and uncertainty such as Brazil?

KRULAK: There's only one leadership at a time, and it is that leadership which provides the police candidates to be taught. Patently, if one government is supplanted by another, and the successor government doesn't want it, they're not going to send their students to be trained by Americans. They're not going to ask for a mission.

MOSS: All right. Let me ask you another direct question. Do you know of any case in which U.S. people were sent in in support of internal security forces in Latin America?

KRULAK: U.S. People...

MOSS: Right.

KRULAK: ...sent in in support of. You mean...

MOSS: Perhaps Special Forces. Perhaps CIA people.

KRULAK: Oh. No, I don't.

MOSS: Okay. Good. Because I had heard this, simply by hearsay, and I want to nail it down and kill it, if it's not true.

KRULAK: I'm not a good witness. The people to ask are CIA. I just don't know of any, but that's not to say that I knew everything that was going on in this area, because it was a bit out of the counterinsurgency region. This was more in the area of covert operations perhaps, so I will just say I know of none whatever.

MOSS: Okay. Fine. There were some other committees that were in operation at this time in addition to [Special Group] (CI) that we hear about occasionally from time to time in these interviews. The [Special Group] 5412 committee, does that ring any bells with you? Did you participate in its deliberations at all? Would you talk about that in the same way that you talked about the Special Group (CI)?

KRULAK: I don't know that I should.

MOSS: All right. This is fair enough. I understand it. I've read the documents myself. I've had...

KRULAK: I'm sensitive about my knowledge of matters which at that time were highly classified, and I would not wish to do anything improper in disclosing knowledge in terms of my recollections.

MOSS: Well, let me ask the questions very generally then. Do you think that the kind of thing that 5412 was doing was a realistic, practical sort of thing, or were people misleading themselves?

KRULAK: It was realistic and practical.

MOSS: Okay.

KRULAK: It's the name of the game.

MOSS: Okay. Do you think it had any – what about the effects?

KRULAK: Yes. Yes.

MOSS: Good or bad?

KRULAK: Favorable.

MOSS: Favorable. Fine.

KRULAK: To this extent: every enterprise that a government or an organization undertakes can be acclaimed as having some success. And the degree of success that you claim for it is largely a function of your personal enthusiasm. I don't wish to go overboard on anything that had to do with counterinsurgency as being a resounding success. However, they all moved toward the target.

MOSS: Does the mongoose committee ring any bells?

KRULAK: Yes.

MOSS: And...

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KRULAK: I have the same reaction to this one.

MOSS: Same reaction there. Okay. Fine. Let me ask you about another person who's on the fringes of these things: General Lansdale [Edward G. Lansdale]. What was his part in this sort of thing? Did you know of his being nominated, not nominated, but suggested to be ambassador to Vietnam, and do you know the story of why he was turned down?

KRULAK: Well, I find it difficult to get a handle on the subject of Edward Lansdale in terms of an interview. It's multi-sided. It's a combination of grays and blacks. It's not a clearly definable topic, and I would not wish to do him a disservice by overgeneralization. As you know, Lansdale worked for an agency of the Defense Department in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration. That agency had to do with international matters, some of an intelligence nature. He held over into the Kennedy administration. His relationship with the Secretary of Defense was handled mainly through the office of the Deputy Secretary, Mr. Gilpatric, who was the individual who knew Lansdale and managed his assignments and sort of interpolated what he did for McNamara's eyes.

There came a moment when Gilpatric either was gone, or was not available, when McNamara arrogated to himself these matters and at that time tended to diminish the scope of Lansdale's activity, for reasons best known to himself.

Lansdale had, as you may know, a relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem during the pre-1962 days. I say pre-1962, that pre-Kennedy days. The depth of this relationship is measured variously by the identity of the person to whom you're speaking. It may have been very deep, and it may not. But it lost its significance when Diem was killed, in any case.

Lansdale is characterized variously as a deeply knowledgeable student of Indochina and as a charlatan. In this discussion I would make only one substantive observation: where Indochina is concerned, there are a lot of Lansdales, a lot of people whose knowledge is regarded by one as a treasure and by another as dross. And he's not alone in this. My personal relationship with him was not profound. We dealt in pretty much two different kinds of war. And I would not like to characterize further the quality of his contribution – more from a viewpoint of humility than reticence. History will have to tell. I would only say that there are few individuals in my knowledge more damned and at the same time applauded, and history's going to have to portray Lansdale's real part. I hope this isn't too evasive.

MOSS: No, I think that it does just the right thing on this. Let me ask you about another person who gets involved in this. And we're getting on to Vietnam now rather quickly, I think. Let me ask you about the contributions of Roger Hilsman.

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KRULAK: Roger had an extraordinary background which may have done him more harm than good. He went to West Point. This gave him a sort of an insight into the military mind – assuming there is such a thing – to the extent that often he attempted to take an ambivalent view, the view of the statesman and the view of the soldier, to the derogation of his view as a statesman because he may have improperly characterized the view of the soldier. Roger had great self-confidence, and he enjoyed the confidence of many, including Harriman. He was in a position of responsibility at a time when we were losing pretty badly, and this temporal fact probably damaged him. I wouldn't wish to characterize his stature within the Department of State. This isn't a thing that a soldier should do. There are State Department people who could help you there. But I do feel that he had problems by virtue of having had a little military background.

MOSS: Let me get on to the Vietnam thing. There seemed to be several benchmarks. Most of them seem to be concurrent with trips to Vietnam by various people. You had Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] going out early in the game. Later a Taylor-Rostow mission in October of '61. Sometime later Forrestal goes out with Hilsman. And then finally, you have your trip with Mendenhall [Joseph A. Mendenhall], and then the whole crowd goes out afterwards.

KRULAK: No, you've left out a couple of important ones.

MOSS: I left out a couple.

KRULAK: Trips were benchmarks. That's right. This is the instant expert syndrome. And you mentioned important ones. The Taylor mission was probably the most important up to its time.

MOSS: The initial one in October '61.

KRULAK: Yeah, yeah. The Taylor mission, very important. The next most important perhaps more important than the Taylor mission really, but chronologically the next one of great importance was the first McNamara trip. McNamara-Lemnitzer, I believe, McNamara-Lemnitzer. At this time, Taylor still was in the EOB [Executive Office Building].

During the trip McNamara exhibited to me the tremendous acuity of his mind. He saw the humblest sort of military force in Vietnam, which is the little hamlet militia, and perceived that they were the least trained, the least organized, the poorest armed of everybody in Vietnam and said to me. "I understand what you've been saying. These are important people. We should put money into them instead of those larger forces." He caught this very quickly and it was a very important manifestation of his wisdom. That mission was very important.

Then the successive McNamara missions were very important. The Honolulu missions were very important. Each of them brought back to the chief executive a growing level of sobriety with respect to the problem, because his major experts were seeing it first hand. As to McNamara, I make this quite plain: I admired him in this area. I'm not interested in the TFX [Tactical Fighter, Experimental (Air Force)]. In this area I admired him, because he saw the truth more quickly than most, and he saw through the phoniness of what he was told when he went to Vietnam be it by Vietnamese, or our own people; not phoney necessarily because they intended it to be, but because they didn't know any better perhaps. In any case, he saw through it all.

MOSS: Could you identify some of the reality and some of the illusion?

KRULAK: Sure. I will give you an example. He asked to be given a presentation upon arrival in Saigon of the status of what we then called pacification – it's gone through several levels of nomenclature, but that's what we called it then – the level of pacification of the various provinces in terms of time phasing. In other words, where are we now, what is the route from where we are to where we want to go and how long do you plan to take to traverse it?

He received such a presentation. He was agnostic about where we are now, but not visibly so. But on the route from where we are to where we want to go and how long we're going to get there he simply fulminated. He said, "You don't know what you're talking about. You cannot do what you say you propose to do, and the fact that you say that you're going to do it causes me to question whether you know where we are now." He went right to the heart of it. He eradicated the whole presentation which had been prepared at great length. Is that a good example?

MOSS: Yes, I think it is. I think it's very good. Now, where do people like Harkins [Paul D. Harkins] and Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] fit into this?

KRULAK: Nolting.

MOSS: Yeah. The ambassador and Harkins, the MAAG [Military Assistant Advisory Group] boss – later MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam].

KRULAK: These were both very straightforward men, who had a keen understanding of the nature of the problem. And the extent that they came into disrepute was a combination of two factors both outside of their control. First, the tremendous growth in enemy power in Vietnam made their units of measure inaccurate. If for instance, Harkins said, "What I propose to do is to go from here to there," and then

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it turns out he couldn't get there, it was less a matter of his misjudgment than it was of the tremendous accretion of enemy power which upset his time table. And the same with Nolting. Indeed, they were good, able men who were given a gargantuan job to do with very

small resources whose failure to achieve dramatic results was less a measure of error on their part, either organizationally or otherwise, than it was of the tremendous onrush of the North Vietnamese invasion if you will.

MOSS: Let's move to the events in 1963. The Buddhist crisis begins in May or thereabouts. The United States' press in Saigon gets very excited about that. There's a great barrage of reports back to Washington that Diem has lost the favor of his people and that things are really going down the drain. In June Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.] replaces Nolting. Do you know anything of the circumstances of the Lodge appointment?

KRULAK: The only things that I hesitate to say "know," are not really of direct knowledge, but only those that are acquired vicariously, and I don't think that I'm the one to comment on Lodge versus Nolting at all. I've given you my view about Nolting. And I'm sure that history will bring him out looking that way.

MOSS: I'm more interested, at this point, in why Lodge was chosen or who was pushing him for the job?

KRULAK: Oh, who was pushing him for the job?

MOSS: Right.

KRULAK: I don't know. Or I don't want to interpolate. I'd rather confine my comments to matters of direct knowledge and, suffice it to say, I defend Nolting. I believe he did a good job with means by ten orders of magnitude less than were made available to his successors.

MOSS: All right, we have continuing Buddhist problems and Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] with their countermeasures and so on. Going up into the August period we have rumors of coups and coup plotting all over the place. I understand you had a word of coup plotting day in and day out and really couldn't tell one coup from another for a long time.

KRULAK: Yes.

MOSS: Then we come to the notorious twenty-fourth of August cable in which you had some role, I understand. Would you talk about that, describe the incident?

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KRULAK: I'd like to refresh my mind just a little bit. I hadn't thought of it in some time.

MOSS: It's my impression or my understanding that the cable was essentially put

together by Forrestal and Harriman, perhaps Hilsman involved as well. Just about everybody who was anybody was out of town. McNamara was off somewhere. Taylor was out of town. The President was out of town. I believe even Rusk [Dean Rusk] was out of town.

KRULAK: So was Gilpatric.

MOSS: Right. Right. In the routing of the.... This was on a Saturday, I believe.

KRULAK: That's right.

MOSS: And in the routing of it, it was never clearly understood at the higher level, at the Bundy level, whether or not everybody had really cleared it. The impression was given that it had been cleared by everyone, but there's been some argument about it since. And certainly Sunday night and Monday morning there was another cable that went out that changed the tone of the thing, the 24 August cable being very much pro-coup in its tone, the other one backing off and saying, "Be very careful about this sort of thing." Now, do you recall...

KRULAK: Okay. There were some very sensible ground rules. One of them was you don't send a message to COMUSMACV [Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] or the ambassador on matters that affect the other without first coordinating it within the Washington hierarchy. This is common sense. I believe you were right, that the cable had its prime architecture with Hilsman and Mike Forrestal. There might have been other participation by Harriman and maybe even Mac Bundy, although I wouldn't be sure.

In the quest for a concurrence from the Secretary of Defense, on the one hand, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the other, they found that the Secretary of Defense was gone, and that Roswell Gilpatric was down in Warrenton, and that Maxwell Taylor was gone. And here I was sort of the horse holder for both in this area.

So they were led to me down the sec def [Secretary of Defense] pipeline and down the Joint Chiefs of Staff pipeline. They converged on me in the locker room at the Chevy Chase Club. They asked me to come to the White House. So I scampered down there, and I looked at the message. I just don't recall exactly how vehement I was, now. I just said, "No smoke. If you want a release on this, you're going to have to go to the Secretary of Defense, even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff won't touch it." And McNamara was out of the country. I think he was over – yes, he was in Paris.

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MOSS: That's right.

KRULAK: "You're going to have to get Gilpatric. If you wish, you can say this and only this to Gilpatric where I am concerned: that I saw it, but that did not concur in

it.” And this was my part in it. I left the White House, and what transpired after that is history.

MOSS: Do you know of any special instructions either to Harkins or to Lodge as to how they were to act in the light of the coup plotting; what was to be their role?

KRULAK: Yes. The instructions were straightforward: to have no part in it, to neither encourage nor discourage these internal matters. Those were their overt instructions anyhow.

MOSS: I get the sense, from reading the NSC [National Security Council] material on this, that it gets to be a little bit stronger than that. At one point the phrasing is “You will not thwart a coup attempt.”

KRULAK: I don’t remember any such words. It could very well be, because, as you know, in our government at that time there were those who believe that Ngo Dinh Diem was not the man for the country. I might add also that there were those who did. And the dichotomy was quite visible. The action to thwart a coup might logically be accompanied by a similar observation that “You will not undertake to promote one.”

MOSS: I get the impression from reading the material though that the latter was certainly not emphasized and is more notable by its absence.

KRULAK: Could be.

MOSS: Leading to the suspicion that it was quite deliberate.

KRULAK: There were those in our country who agreed with David Halberstam, who very much disliked Diem.

MOSS: What do you know of the activities that involved Lieutenant Colonel Conein [Lucien D. Conein] in Saigon. C-O-N-E-I-N. I believe I’m pronouncing it correctly.

KRULAK: Oh, really not an awful lot. He had a close relationship with a fellow by the name of Dinh [Brigadier General Ton That Dinh], D-I-N-H, whom he counseled and influenced. He had a lot of knowledge of the interior machinations of the government, the Vietnamese government. That’s enough.

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MOSS: Okay. Let me back up just a little bit. I have neglected to ask you to talk about your trip to Vietnam with Mendenhall and the subsequent meeting that has

been rather widely reported, I guess, in the White House at which the President is said to have asked you if you'd been to the same country.

KRULAK: That's correct. He did.

MOSS: Would you talk about that a bit.

KRULAK: That's exactly what he said. It came about at an NSC meeting when there was some disagreement about a comment made by John McCone who said that there were reports of widespread disaffection within the Vietnamese military, because of the Buddhist crisis. And this was then amplified by Mr. Rusk who said that there were some reports of the likelihood of defection in the Vietnamese military, while emphasizing that he had no knowledge of their validity. The President said, "My gosh, if this is true, it's of profound importance to us, because if the South Vietnamese military isn't there to hold it together, nothing will. Now do we know this to be true or don't we?"

And then there was a considerable discussion. Finally the President said, "It's obvious we don't know, and we'd better find out. Now I want to send somebody out there to find out whether there is a likelihood of large scale defections – the word, defection, that means to go and fight for the Communists – defections of the Vietnamese military. Now, how can we do that?"

General Taylor said, "Our advisors are in many cases near enough to their counterpart that their counterpart could not conceal these things from them even if they wanted to, and in most cases they wouldn't want to. I believe that we should send somebody to talk carefully and objectively to our advisors on this subject from one end of the country to the other." The President said, "That makes good sense," at which point McNamara turned to me and said, "Brute, are you prepared to go?" I said, "Sure." Then the President said, "How soon?" I said, "Oh, I can go any time." You know, I thought he might mean the day after tomorrow. And he looked at his watch – it was about 11 o'clock – and he said to somebody, "Let's get a jet to take General Krulak – he called me by my first name – out to Vietnam at 1 o'clock." Well, I had one heck of a time reconciling in my mind how I was going to do all the things I had to do because I had to go to the Pentagon and get some papers, and I had to go home and get a toothbrush. Anyhow, I just got to my feet and said, "Well, if that's the schedule, Mr. President, I'd better get going." At which point Dean Rusk raised his hand and said, "I think that somebody from the State Department ought to go with General Krulak." See, I was going to talk to the military advisors on a matter that hadn't a thing to do with

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the State Department. Nevertheless, I could see why they would want someone there, because they had reason not to trust a soldier all off by himself on a matter of this great importance.

So the President said, "Well, that's up to you. If you want to send somebody, go ahead. And who would you send?" Well the Secretary said he didn't know, but that they'd have somebody there. And so I said, "Okay, I'm going to be there at 1 o'clock," and I got out thinking that if no one else was there I'd take off anyhow.

At 1 o'clock I got there and one of the White House Jet Stars was fired up and I piled aboard, Mendenhall was there already, and he said, "I'm coming from the State Department." So we got aboard, and we rode to Offutt Air Force Base and refueled, and then to Travis [Air Force Base] where they had a Tanker-135 [Strato-Tanker KC-135B] actually with two of the engines already running when we landed. We jumped aboard and the pilot just said to me, "I am told that you want to go to Saigon as fast as you can." I said, "That's right." And he said, "Well, we have 192,000 pounds of fuel, and we're going to try and go non-stop. It's never been done before. We may have to go into Okinawa."

Well, we flew into Okinawa, and had to stop because of an airfield curfew at Saigon. Incidentally, the President had said, "I'll give you forty-eight hours in Vietnam, then come back."

MOSS: In Vietnam?

KRULAK: In Vietnam.

MOSS: Okay.

KRULAK: So we got to Okinawa and during the flight I had realized the things I had failed to do....

MOSS: Could you hang on just one minute while I flip this tape.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

MOSS: We're on again.

KRULAK: I'd failed to ask the President or the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense to send Lodge a message and tell him that I was coming there and what I was coming for, and to support me. That would have made it a lot easier, but it was too late. So we flew down from Okinawa and arrived at Tan Son Nhut at 6 o'clock in the morning, just at daylight. I was met by somebody from COMUSMACV. I had warned him by message of my coming. He was a good friend of mine – the Chief of Staff, a marine general. I quickly outlined what I wanted:

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"I want an airplane; I want to leave here at 9 o'clock; I want to go all the way up to the I Corps area; I want to come back down to the IV Corps area. And I've got to do it in two days. I want an officer with me who can open every door and so on." Okay. He said, "No problem, we'll lay it on. It'll be there."

I said, "But before I go, I have to check in with General Harkins and the ambassador, so get me somebody on the phone in the embassy." So I talked to some... [interruption] "get somebody in Lodge's head headquarters on the phone."

This is 6 o'clock in the morning – 6:15 maybe. And I identified myself and said, 'I want to see the Ambassador right away.' 'Well, you can't see him. He won't be in until 9 or something like that.' And I said, 'No. I've got to see him now.' 'Well, we can't wake him up.' 'Oh, you've got to wake him up.' You see, I had no leverage. I hadn't done the right thing.

But finally, they had the courage to go to Lodge, and he's a most accommodating guy. He immediately got up and came to me, as a matter of fact. We met in his office at about, oh, I'd say, 7:15 or thereabouts, which was very nice of him because he didn't know what I was about. Of course, when I described it to him in his office, he was most anxious to help in every way. He wanted to make sure that I got all the help I could.

Meanwhile, Mendenhall went to Hue and to Nha Trang and Saigon and saw his people.

I got back after two days and nights of hard wrestling and I told the airplane to be ready to take off for Washington. I had only one thing to do and that was to see Lodge and Harkins, because they were keenly interested in knowing what I learned.

I read out what I had learned and then ran for the airplane because I had an engagement. I had to be back for an 11 o'clock White House meeting. That was the arrangement. All right.

So we took off and flew to Elmendorf, Alaska and then down to Washington. Well, during the long, long, long eighteen hour ride, of course, Mendenhall and I had a good deal of conversation and it was quite obvious that he had been told that the whole town was under water, that everybody was going to abandon ship, because of the Buddhist crisis that the Vietnamese government had no strength, that it was a melancholy situation next to hopeless.

All right. I spent the time going back writing what I had learned. Oh, I had voluminous notes, the names of advisors and what they said.

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Many Vietnamese talked to me. Although I just wanted to talk to advisors, often the advisors would bring their Vietnamese counterpart in and say, "You tell General Krulak about the dedication of your men to their country and so on." And they would talk. Of course, they came out clean that nobody was going to defect to the North Vietnamese.

And I would only ask you if you will recall how many people have defected to North Vietnam since the war began. None. Okay.

So here's the report through the diplomatic sources in Hue, Nha Trang and Saigon: everybody's going to run away and defect to the Communists. And so I fly in the face of that with the advisors' evidence, which is what Kennedy wanted. He wanted the facts.

All right. So we came back, we sat down. Oh, no. We landed at about 6 in the morning; had until 11. I had my thing all written. I got it to the Pentagon and put five typists to work. I was able to deliver it reproduced when we got to the NSC meeting.

I made my little pitch: "I went to so many units and talked to so many people and their names are all listed and here is what they said. My conclusion is that while there's a hell of a lot wrong in Vietnam, the counterinsurgency effort isn't doing too well, and we have atrocious problems, one of them is not the prospect of mass defection of the military."

Whereupon Rusk said, "Mr. Mendenhall went with General Krulak, as you know, Mr. President, and he has given me a few thoughts of his. I hope you would listen to him." So Mendenhall just said pretty much the opposite. He said, "The country is in absolute turmoil. The military hate their commanders, and their commanders hate Ngo Dinh Diem, and they all hate Ngo Dinh Nhu. And they're going to defect. There are going to be a lot of defections." At which point the President asked the famous question: "Were you two fellows in the same country?" There was a long silence because, after all, he's the chief executive and he has two people and they give him absolutely contrary counsel. There was long silence.

Finally, I said, "I think I can answer your question." He looked down the table and said, "What is it?" I said, "Mr. Mendenhall has given you an urban or metropolitan viewpoint. And the two views may be quite opposed, but I will only say I'll stick with mine, because the countryside is where the war is." And the President got to his feet right then. That was all he came to the meeting for, and he had what he wanted. He got to his feet and he walked out. I was seated at the very end of the cabinet table in the direction of the President's office. He stopped and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Come in, when the meeting is finished." I did. I didn't go in alone because McNamara came with me. The President said, "I just want to tell you I believe you." And that's the true story.

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MOSS: Very good.

KRULAK: It makes no difference what you've read in anybody else's books. That's the truth.

MOSS: Speaking of defections, let me ask you about the supposed contact of Nhu with Hanoi, and the potential of the general's overthrowing, and if he made overt moves in this direction. This goes back to earlier, in August, I believe.

KRULAK: Yes.

MOSS: Do you recall this?

KRULAK: Yes, of course, and I don't know and neither does anyone else really know. My attitude about Nhu was that he was a nut and a chauvinist, anti-Western, anti-Caucasian, a mandarin and completely incomprehensible to our mind.

MOSS: Do you think anybody in the administration or in Saigon had much idea of what a post-Diem Vietnam would be like?

KRULAK: No.

MOSS: Did they think about it?

KRULAK: There is a famous quote from a doctor – I always forget his name¹; something like Lilly [Patrick J. Honey]. I'll think of it – a Britisher, who told McNamara in the pre-coup period when there was all this chatter about coup, coup, coup. "If Diem is overthrown, the likelihood of whatever replacing him being as good is small." And McNamara repeated that often, and I heard him tell the President that.

MOSS: Let me ask you a final question. Well, no, let me ask you something else before I ask you the last one. What other areas did you get into – or were you pretty well occupied with the Vietnam scene all the time – other than the counterinsurgency issue?

KRULAK: Pretty much. Pretty much Vietnam.

MOSS: Okay. Let me ask you this now: In looking back on it and with the hindsight of the past few years, what do you think could or should have been done differently than was? Do you think that they knew where they were going at that time or not?

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KRULAK: I believe that Diem knew where he was going. The North Vietnamese mass invasion changed the name of the game, and lamentably the activities aimed at solving the pre-invasion problem were not successful in solving the problem which existed after the invasion. For instance, before the North Vietnamese came south in strength, the total of our effort needed to be addressed to saving the people, to protecting them from nighttime depredation and stealth and terror; murder. When the invasion came, we had the prospect of an enemy in the field to fight in addition to protecting the people. Our error, which was made in the, oh, '65 and on period, was to focus inordinately upon the visible enemy in the field without realizing that the other project which we had assayed with reasonable accuracy before remained there undiminished. That was our major mistake.

MOSS: This squares – I understand, at least, I understand superficially – with what Lewis Walt has been quoted in the paper this morning as saying, that we fought the war as though it were another Korea and really didn't learn our lesson until late.

KRULAK: Well, all I can say is that he has to be speaking for himself. I had learned mine early.

MOSS: Okay. Okay, fine. Is there anything else that you recall of significance that you think should go into the record at this point? It's an open one to hit you with at the end, and it always floors people when it comes out, but....

¹ Interviewer's note: The doctor was Patrick J. Honey.

KRULAK: Well, I guess I could take the easy way out and say I can't think of any. The simple fact is they were dramatic times and very great stakes were on the table and almost everything that we did, even very small people like myself, wielded great influence almost without knowing it.

MOSS: Were you involved at all in the missile crisis, for instance?

KRULAK: Only in a very limited way. My interests were involved in one part of my job known as cover and deception. Certain deceptive activities that related to the Cuban Missile Crisis had their origin in my office. But in contrast to the very great things that went on at that time, I would say it was of no consequence.

MOSS: How would you assess Kennedy as president?

KRULAK: As president, not as commander in chief?

MOSS: I'll ask that next.

KRULAK: I'm just another citizen, just another voter.

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MOSS: If you prefer then, as commander in chief.

KRULAK: No, I'll answer your question.

MOSS: Okay.

KRULAK: I believe he was hyperpolitical as a President, unnecessarily so. As Commander in Chief, I believe he was extremely good. He understood authority and its distribution, decentralization. And he understood the responsibility and how it focuses on those in charge. He was a much better Commander in Chief than Johnson by a dozen orders of magnitude because he understood what the chain of command means. He had the confidence and respect and admiration of the people in the military and earned it. Is that a good answer?

MOSS: Would you amplify your remark about being hyperpolitical?

KRULAK: Yes. I'm speaking now just as an ordinary fellow with the franchise and nothing more. I sensed political acuity should be concealed by the politicians, but his was all too obvious to me.

MOSS: Fine. Thank you very much indeed, General Krulak, for what I'm sure will be a most useful interview to the historians.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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11 January 1973

General Krulak:

There is an additional point on which I would like to have your testimony for balance. I refer to the meetings of the National Security Council immediately before and immediately after your trip to Saigon with Joe Mendenhall in September 1963. I have the Bromley Smith memoranda reporting what was said. There are also accounts by Arthur Schlesinger, Roger Hilsman, and (now) David Halberstam. The accounts all vary, considerably (a situation that is familiar to you, I am sure).

One of the things that is hardest for an historian to assess properly, given the quantity of second-hand information (almost hearsay), is the intensity of feelings on the part of the participants at such meetings and the effect that either personal temper or the growing heat of the advocacy battle influence the course of conversations and decisions. I am particularly interested, for instance, to know if Averell Harriman, in the course of either of the above-mentioned meetings, called you a "fool," and if he did, what your personal reaction was to the statement? Both Schlesinger and Halberstam contend that he did, and infer that the tempers were high. Hilsman does not report it, nor does the memo by Bromley Smith (for either meeting). Since you did not mention it in our interview, I hope that you will write down a word or two in reply to this note, to tell the story from your point of view. It will be added to your interview.

I, and future researchers, will be grateful to you for this.

Thank you,



William W. Moss

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SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92112

VICTOR H. KRULAK
VICE PRESIDENT

TELEPHONE
714-234-7111

17 January 1973

Mr. William W. Moss
National Archives and Records Service
John F. Kennedy Library
380 Trapelo Road
Waltham, Massachusetts 02154

Dear Mr. Moss:

I will be glad to add to what I have already said respecting the events preceding and following my September 1963 visit to Saigon.

With respect to intensity of feeling. --In the meeting which preceded my trip there was no heat whatever. It was, as I recall, about the normal NSC discussion, distinguished only by the President's very pregnant observation concerning the importance of our knowing whether or not there was the likelihood of large scale defection in the South Vietnamese military and his assertion that a testing of our advisory system would give the answer which he sought.

The meeting which took place following our return from Saigon did reflect a little heat. Mr. Mendenhall was quite calm, simply saying what he believed he had learned; specifically, that there was evidence of imminent defection to the Communists among the Vietnamese military.

For my part, I probably felt emotional but spoke with restraint, advancing the opposite thesis.

Mr. Reuben Phillips was more emotional in his comments regarding weakness in the pacification program.

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Mr. William W. Moss
17 January 1972

The principals at the meeting -- the President, the Secretaries of State and Defense, John McCone, George McBundy, General Taylor, exhibited no agitation.

With respect to Averell Harriman and his reported comment that I was a "fool", the following may add something to your knowledge:

At none of the above meetings did Harriman call me a fool - or anything else. To my recollection he spoke only briefly at both, the State Department ball being carried by Rusk.

When Schlesinger's book quoted him as so characterizing me, I was serving in Hawaii. It did not ring true, because my relationship with Harriman had been remarkably good throughout my time in Washington. He once reminded me that I was the only general for whom he held a dinner upon departure from the city, and observed that my reasonable and resolute attitude had benefited him greatly during a critical period.

I wrote Harriman a letter, quoted the Schlesinger statement, and asked him if he would comment. He responded promptly dismissing it as a falsehood. I will set about trying to find Harriman's letter to me and, if successful, will give it to you.

The Halberstam comment obviously was borrowed from Schlesinger.

The foregoing, to the extent that I am able to make it so, represents fact and not conjecture.

Enclosed are copies of the agreement and amendment as you request.

If I can help you further, please write me.

Sincerely,



V. H. Krulak

VHK:ck

Encs.