

William H. Sullivan Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 8/5/1970
Administrative Information

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William H. Sullivan (1922-2013) was the U.N adviser to the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs in the State Department (1960-1964); Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (1963-1964); Ambassador to Laos (1964-1969). This interview focuses on Sullivan's involvement in Vietnamese affairs, the 1963 coup that overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem, and tensions between the United States military and the embassy in South Vietnam, among other issues.

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William H. Sullivan
William H. Sullivan

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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM H. SULLIVAN

August 5, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I think the logical place to begin the general topic of the conversation today is Vietnam -- the last time we covered Laos and your experiences with Harriman [W. Averell Harriman] in negotiating in Paris as well as Moscow. I think the logical place to begin is with the question when did you first become involved in Vietnam affairs? Can you remember, perhaps, some of the chronology of this? Were you involved early in this role as the UN adviser for Far East in '60, '61, '62?

SULLIVAN: Very little. I used to see some of the Vietnamese at that time when they had observers at New York at the General Assembly and things of that sort. But I had very little active involvement with Vietnam until -- well, we're talking about Harriman -- the Geneva Conference. At that stage, of course, one of our other negotiating partners was the South Vietnamese and one of the other adversaries -- of course, the main adversary was the North Vietnamese. That is to say the main active adversary.

During that period I became fairly intimately acquainted with many of the South Vietnamese leaders because they were in and out of Geneva, and their foreign minister was the head of their delegation. The man who subsequently became foreign minister was the deputy of the group. I dealt.... And, of course, on the other side of the table was... [Interruption]... Xuan Thuy who's now the head of the North Vietnamese delegation to Paris. I saw him every other day across the table. So on that occasion we did get acquainted.

Now, we did have one specific contact at the end of the negotiations on Laos. When we had achieved the agreement on Laos, Harriman asked for and got permission from the President to have some private, very private bilateral talks with the North Vietnamese to see if we

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could reach any similar agreement or see if we could negotiate an agreement on Vietnam. I haven't talked...

O'BRIEN: You haven't talked about this. No.

SULLIVAN: It was set up for us by the intermediation of the Burmese. It was a very discreet fellow names Jim Barrington [James Barrington]. Jim was Anglo-Burman, I think. Jim was the head of the Burmese delegation to the Geneva talks. And he got the North Vietnamese Foreign minister, and Ha Von Lau, now currently again at Paris and who had been at Geneva for the '54 Agreements, to come to his hotel room. Averell Harriman and I slipped up a back street and alley to go into the back door of this hotel room. We had to do that because Geneva's a relatively small town. And all these hotels are fairly close to each other. This was a small hotel fairly near the railroad station. Had we come cross the main square and driven up in front of it, I think everybody in town would have seen it. So, instead, we walked up this back street and went in and had this session with the two Vietnamese, Ung Van Khiem who was then the foreign minister, who is now the minister of interior and Ha Van Lau and Averell and myself. Jim Barrington stayed in the room but rather discreetly withdrew and didn't say much of anything once he'd introduced us.

It was a relatively useless conversation. We got absolutely nowhere. We hit a stone wall. The North Vietnamese quite clearly were not interested in negotiating at that time. They were adamant in their positions. The foreign minister was a rather wooden little guy anyway. I don't think he had any degree of discretion or any degree of latitude. Ha Van Lau was functioning as more or less as interpreter. Ung Van Khiem insisted on talking in Vietnamese; Ha Van Lau and I talked to each other in French; and then I translated into English for Averell. So we had this rather awkward grouping anyway. So we got nowhere.

That was our only negotiating effort. As I said, the President personally and specifically had sanctioned it. I don't think it's ever yet come to public notice or public print. But it's quite clear at that time that they were not interested. But it is also clear that the President was interested.

O'BRIEN: Was there anything specific at that point that you were interested in outside of setting up, perhaps, another meeting which would go into more substantive things?

SULLIVAN: We were interested in any prospects whatsoever that they were interested in negotiating with us and having some talks under any form or forum or

format. We just wanted to see if there were any prospects of negotiating. And they were just dead against it.

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O'BRIEN: Well, within the administration, one hears comments as early as 1961, people in the White House realize that Vietnam was a major problem. Laos was secondary. Is that that true in your recollections?

SULLIVAN: Yes, that's true in essence. This was the essence of the report that Max Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] and Walt Rostow brought back from their visit there. But having said that, then, I think you have to also recall what the attitude was toward it. The attitude was that Laos was a secondary problem; Laos was a poor place to get bogged down in because it was inland, had no access to the sea and no proper logistics lines and so forth and so on; that it was rather inchoate as a nation; that the Laos were not fighters, et cetera. While on the other hand if you were going to have a confrontation. the place to have it was in Vietnam because it did not have logistic access to the sea and therefore, we had military advantages. It was an articulated functioning nation. Its troops were tigers and real fighters. And, therefore, the advantages would be all on our side to have the confrontation and showdown in Vietnam and not get sucked into this Laos operation.

So, I think, in saying that the White House recognized and that all of us did recognize that Vietnam was the main show, it wasn't at all the same to say that people were afraid of Vietnam as a quagmire; people were looking on Vietnam as something that would be a more solid instrument for settling this thing.

O'BRIEN: There is a memo that comes out of the Taylor-Rostow mission in '61 that suggests that unless there is a substantial involvement -- that's the general context of the words there -- unless there's a rather substantial involvement of U.S. troops in Vietnam at that point, Vietnam will fall. Do you happen to recall whether that's the...

SULLIVAN: I don't think it really read that way. It read that we should be prepared if necessary. There were a number of proposals that came out of the Taylor mission which went through -- I can't remember how many there were -- some number like nineteen, all of which were addressed toward improving the military, economic and political posture of the South Vietnamese. But then there was an addendum to it which in effect said that if the North Vietnamese don't recognize that this means that they're going to be faced with an overwhelming proposition, then we may have to be prepared for the idea of introducing further support including bombing North Vietnam.

O'BRIEN: Yes.

SULLIVAN: That was a sort of Rostow codicil to the reply.

O'BRIEN: Rostow is one of the principle figures arguing bombing as early as '61.

SULLIVAN: Arguing the potential ultimate necessity for it, arguing that

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the North Vietnamese might not, because of the technique of indirect guerilla warfare that they've developed, that they might consider that there was enough of a challenge to them and that, therefore, they might have to be hit where it hurt at home before they would accept the logic of the fact that they couldn't achieve a military victory through insurgency methods.

O'BRIEN: Well, is there a line of reasoning too, that after the Laotian settlement then something more substantial can be done in Vietnam? Is there a linking in that way as you recall?

SULLIVAN: More substantial in what sense? More military...

O'BRIEN: Right. As well as a political effort....

SULLIVAN: Well, there were two or three lines converging. I think Averell Harriman's line always was that once you get the Laotian settlement that you might be able to expand it into a larger area of understanding, and, particularly, if you got the Soviets to recognize that it suited their interests as well as ours to try to neutralize the whole Indochina area, that otherwise it might fall prey to the Chinese, and that we might be able to build therefore on the Laos settlement as something which would move toward a larger settlement in the whole Indochina area. That's one thread. And the other thread was that if you get the Laos thing tamped down and you're going to have this continuing confrontation with the North Vietnamese, that yes, you could do a neater, more surgical job in Vietnam. That's sort of the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] viewpoint.

Now, I think the President shared a little of both, as to say, he recognized the military logic of the latter argument. But I think his efforts were all directed toward the former. And I think this is why he did authorize us to have this session with the North Vietnamese in Geneva. At heart he was constantly looking for opportunities to see if we could expand from the Laos agreement, but at the same time feeling more confident about his military posture in Vietnam once Laos had been tidied up.

O'BRIEN: Are you getting a pretty clear picture from the intelligence that's coming in through both the military and through the agency as to what is going on in Vietnam?

SULLIVAN: No, we had a very sharp difference of views, as you may know. We had our military intelligence coming in giving quite an optimistic picture of

what was being done by the South Vietnamese government and the prospects for pacification and for control. While on the other side, particularly from the State Department and to some extent CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and AID [Agency for International Development] a very bleak sort of picture coming in and frustration and

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concern that the whole thing was swirling down the drain.

You may remember in late '62, I guess it was early '63, we had the famous incident in which we sent out a team of people. And the two fellows who came back to report on all this were Joe Mendenhall [Joseph A. Mendenhall] who was our Vietnam desk officer at that time for the Department of State and Krulak [Victor H. Krulak], General Krulak who was special assistant I guess, for counterinsurgency affairs, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They presented their reports orally, separately at a meeting in the White House. And the President at the end of this said, "Are you sure you two fellows have been in the same country?" So we had quite a divergency during that time.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back a little earlier than that to the formation of the original task force in 1961 under Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] and also the selection of Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting] too, which comes along about the same time. Is the fact that Gilpatric, in Defense, heads up that task force, does this cause any real friction over here in the department? Or does the department consider it a military problem from that point on, from your vantage point?

SULLIVAN: Well, I was in Geneva most of this time during Ros Gilpatric's organization. No, there was not.... There was a great deal of personal and social and intellectual interchange between the people that came in at this period which transcended institutional lines. Ros Gilpatric was part of the bunch in other words. I don't know if you were around here at that time. But Washington during those first two years, particularly of the Kennedy administration, was just filled with dinner parties and evenings in which everybody got together. It didn't make a hell of a lot of difference which department you were working in. It was more of a sense of a team working together on this. So while I was in Geneva most of the time that Ros Gilpatric had it, and when I came back here by that time it had been pretty much passed into Paul Nitze's hands over there, I guess. I'm not aware of any problems here in this building or this department that impinged on it.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about Nolting's selection, the selection of an ambassador to replace Durbrow [Elbridge Durbrow]?

SULLIVAN: Well, Fritz was a comer. I can't remember in 1960 when we were looking for an ambassador for Laos -- this is under the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration -- I was asked to put together a list of candidates, and I came up with a list of about four. The top one on my list was Win Brown [Winthrop G. Brown], who's here now, Ambassador Brown. And Fritz Nolting was either

number two or number three on my list. But he was a Class-1 Officer, relatively junior; he'd been a bright, shining star in Paris and so on. And I put this list up to the then Assistant Secretary Jeff Parsons, who said that Win Brown was his closest friend and his classmate in school and college classmate, roommate in

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school I guess. He couldn't do a thing like this to such a close friend of his. He'd been ambassador to Laos before. And, therefore, he settled on Fritz. And so we asked Fritz to take the job and Fritz turned it down, which was quite a shock because he was a relatively junior officer to be offered an embassy. And so we went back eventually and took Win Brown and sent him. But my only point in saying this is that Fritz was considered at that time as sort of one of the fair-haired fellows. He had a hell of a good record in NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and elsewhere. And when he was nominated and when he was chosen I think everyone felt that this promised very fine things because he had a hell of a good reputation.

O'BRIEN: Did you hear any rumors at that point about Lansdale [Edward G. Lansdale]?

SULLIVAN: Oh, Ed Lansdale has always sort of drifted on the edge of this. I don't know if you know how Ed operated; Ed has a clique of people with him who were devoted to him. They were with him in Vietnam, and they went with him to the Philippines and so forth. And whenever Ed is interested in some particular position, one of his techniques is to have this clique of his start around town starting rumors about Ed being going to get the job. But I think he has his own boys out putting these rumors around. But I don't think there was much of any -- as far as I know there was not much of any pressure behind this from the White House.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about Lansdale on Vietnam? Does he have a... I know at one time he had a pretty close relationship to Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem]. Is that something that fades?

SULLIVAN: Not particularly. Ed was a great sort of freebooter and great as far as operating in a fluid situation. There's no question in my mind that in the period when the French were not only pulling out but doing a little to try to sabotage Diem; and when all these old cults and gangster cliques and groups like Binh Xuyen and what not were taking pot shots at Diem, there were several occasions on which Ed, by rushing in with his fire brigade and bringing in Montagnard gunners and things of that sort, faced these fellows down and staved them off. Now, I think they were faced down partly because they recognized that he was an American and this meant that the strength of the United States was behind this fellow. But, he did the same thing to a large extent with Magsaysay [Ramon Magsaysay] in the Philippines where they were.... So, in that sort of circumstance, in a circumstance where there is fluidity and a great deal of chaos, a fellow

who can come sort of swaggering in with very sharp, decisive, well-shouted commands can crystallize something and make it work.

Now, as the situation got more solid and Diem became more institutionalized

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in the government, he didn't have a need for that sort of cloak and cutlass sort of operation. And so I think Ed's utility to him faded out. And instead, there moved in the bureaucracy of institutional military, particularly in the form of "Hanging Sam" Williams [Samuel T. Williams] who eventually came in and really put it in concrete.

O'BRIEN: Well, Lansdale, though, still tries to become involved and other people try to keep him involved in Vietnam problems and affairs in '61 - '62.

SULLIVAN: He still was around the town. He had a status over in the Pentagon. He was obviously the -- the regular military establishment was obviously freezing him out considerably. But he worked through political angels. He had a line through to Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]. He had good lines through to Hubert Humphrey, for example. He had a lot of people who were on the fringes of the Kennedy administration, who were impressed by him and sponsoring him and so on. But he just turned Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] off considerably. So the President pretty much relied on him and Max Taylor. The president relied on Max Taylor and Bob McNamara. They both were negative. And so I think he never got above that level of influence.

O'BRIEN: There are some negative views over here against him, too, aren't there?

SULLIVAN: Yes, well, he's not a team player and quite unpredictable. So the general view in this building of course, is that you don't take chances on anybody who's going to be irresponsible.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get in this problem of the military management of Vietnam, the problem of going through CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific] rather than directly? I understand there are several proposals to...

SULLIVAN: Oh, yes. I never got very much involved in it. But that came along later. Well, there were two or three times in which it came along. It came along with Westmoreland [William C. Westmoreland] when he took over the function out there, tried to get a direct line back. And Max Taylor when he went out as ambassador, of course, having been CINCPAC's superior previously, made some modifications. But he basically respected and continued to respect the line of command structure. Max was a great fellow for working by the book and he didn't upset the CINCPAC. In fact, I suspect that his tolerance of this relationship did more to solidify it than otherwise.

O'BRIEN: Well, in 1961-'62, this whole question we talked about a little earlier, whether and how things are going in the country; military painting an optimistic view, and on the other hand the view that things are deteriorating and...

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SULLIVAN: Well, this went back now. My first acquaintance with it was in '59 when I visited there one time and Durbrow was then the ambassador, an old friend of mine, and unloaded on me about Williams and Williams' failure to understand the type of guerilla operation that was going on and the need for territorial security and the gendarme type operations, while Williams was expecting a Korea type invasion from the North and was building up a regular military establishment. So it had been going on in that sense as early as '59 when the program of assassination and terror and insurgency became really burgeoning.

O'BRIEN: Well, is the program of assassination largely responsible for this deterioration that takes place in the countryside?

SULLIVAN: Yes. It's a very well directed campaign of assassination, terror, ambushes, the usual guerilla type activities.

O'BRIEN: Well, what happens to Diem and his ability to influence people in the countryside in those years?

SULLIVAN: Diem started out, of course, something of a mystic, came in having been in exile for a long time, organized the Can Lao party as a sort of semi-secret society, through his brothers and his henchmen and his Can Lao friends got out and got the countryside organized in a way that frustrated the embryonic organization that the Viet Minh had left behind, which made it necessary for them to re-infiltrate their people and raise the whole level of this. But Diem in that period, when he was building up his organization, had a lot of foreign friends who had put him into business. Ed Lansdale was one of them. But people like Wolf Ladejinsky who had done the land reform business; Bob Thompson [Robert K.G. Thompson] who the British lent there for counterinsurgency business; oh, Wes Fischel [Wesley Fischel] who's out at Michigan or wherever the devil he is now -- Illinois, I guess -- who was in on building up administration and so forth and so on. And he depended a lot on all these foreigners. And they used to have these regular breakfast meetings, a sort of kitchen/breakfast room cabinet, I guess you'd call it.

Brother Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] who was a fanatic and who was very jealous of all this, and particularly this she-cat of a wife that he had, Madame Nhu, systematically began to break this thing up by poisoning Diem's mind against each one of these individuals in one way or another. And eventually it got him shed of all this apparatus of foreign consultants that he had around him. He then rather drifted back into the intrigue of Vietnamese tong type family politics. And he frankly was lost in that atmosphere, depended more and more on his

brother. He was very much a recluse, stayed in the palace, got damn little in the way of communication coming into him from Vietnamese. So the whole thing atrophied.

O'BRIEN: Well, how do you see this almost tiger-like quality of Nolting to hang on and support Diem and at the same time the generation of a good deal of criticism in guys like Halberstam [David Halberstam]

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and Browne [Malcolm Browne] and Desmond [Desmond Fitzgerald]?

SULLIVAN: Well, Fritz does not, have, as far as I know, any Asian experience. He'd been in Europe. He'd been working largely in NATO. He was very much, very keenly aware of the necessity of building up organizations and institutions which were going to resist communist takeover. He looked, I think, correctly upon Diem as being the only viable institution that he had there on which he could build; and therefore, felt and feared that if he scuttled Diem, that he would have so much chaos that the whole thing would be disastrous and the Communist would take over. He, therefore, got rather defensive about Diem and his institutions. Diem was a frustrating person to deal with; all Vietnamese are. And I think Fritz really got to the point where he felt that orders and actions, instructions for making change risked the collapse of this fabric and that the important thing was to build it up first and then get it reformed. He used to use the expression of trying to do some of these reforms which we were suggesting here from Washington was like trying to perform an appendectomy on a man who was carrying a trunk up a flight of stairs. And that if you attempted surgery in that situation, you'd surely kill the patient. Then the trunk would fall to the basement and so forth and so on. But I think this was the set of mind with which he approached the whole problem.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the things you saw then in the way of evidence and the things that perhaps you've seen since, does Diem really lose his influence in the countryside prior to the assassination or is it mainly perhaps in the American press?

SULLIVAN: Diem's organization in the countryside could have been more effective if it had the benefit of some enlightened social and economic and legislative action. For instance, land reform, a critical one. And if he had used the best advice that was available to him, I think he personally probably would have put all those elements into effect. Instead, the countryside became pretty much the province of his brothers. His brother up in central Vietnam who was a huge landowner himself or who concerned himself with it; and then the archbishop who was protecting the church lands and so on; and then Nhu who was looking at the countryside in terms of putting together his organization of personalism which he felt would.... He was going to organize this group with just as tight an ideology as the Communist had, and he was going to meet the Communists toe-to-toe and defeat them on the countryside. So that you have these conflicting sort of

interests and idiosyncratic purposes on the part of the people who were trying to run the countryside with Diem. I think, I've always felt that Diem, himself, was sincere. He was a person who had no.... He was incorruptible. He had no personal taint of greed or corruption. I think if he'd not had the handicap of all these characters of his

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family around him, he probably would not have lost as much influence in the countryside.

Now, having said all that, the countryside had far from collapsed in 1963. The countryside was being very heavily challenged by a very significant infiltration of regroupees from North Vietnam and by a very active policy of subversion and terror and assassinations. But it was far from collapsed. I've driven all around in areas which later became totally insecure, driving in unarmed convoys -- or unarmed, not convoys, but just groups of cars -- along through areas which were secure in 1963. So it wasn't powerless in the countryside in '63. And once Diem went, once the coup against him did succeed and once he was killed, then is when the deterioration of his countryside set in very rapidly.

O'BRIEN: Well, in Washington there are people that became increasingly critical of Vietnam. Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] says he's one in his book. Why is this? What's the basis of their criticism?

SULLIVAN: Well, the basis of their criticism is multiple. In terms of enlightened democracy and of liberal, political, social, economic thought, Diem's South Vietnam was not much of a model of virtue. So that in itself was disturbing. Let's just take sort of the Roger Hilsman perspective on this.

Secondly, there was a too great a concern or a great concern that too much of the management of our business in South Vietnam was falling into the hands of the "Hanging Sam" Williams type of mentality that you just make a bigger and better military establishment, and goddamnit, you beat the bastards to death. That's the second one.

Thirdly, on the positive side, people like Roger, particularly, had very definite ideas about how you should go about counter-insurgency. And the whole "Ugly American" strain of things was something that they wished and attempted and put into effect in Vietnam which was not being put into effect because they were dealing with not only an American but also Vietnamese attitude and mind that rejected all this, felt it was frustration.

Then, over and above all that, I suppose there was a great desire on the part of people like Roger and others with him attempting to turn over a new leaf in Asia, attempting to find some sort of modus vivendi some sort of relationship with the Chinese Communists, with the Asian Communists; and a feeling that we had misunderstood the roots of Asian communism, that they were rooted in the poverty and despair and oppression of the people of Asia, and that here was therefore some tolerance we should make and some sympathy we should have for their problems rather than looking on them as Stalinists, European type of Communists.

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O'BRIEN: Well, Harriman is somewhat influenced by Hilsman in this, isn't he?

SULLIVAN: Harriman has this very interesting composition of being able to have that sort of platonic ideal coupled with a very hard headed view of how much you can or cannot give in any dealing with the Communists based upon his own experience in dealing with the Communists. So while he was thoroughly sympathetic with this idea that you have to do more in the way of -- you have to beat them out at their own game of social and economic offerings to the people in order to be able to get popular support. If you didn't have popular support, you didn't have strength. If you didn't have strength, you couldn't beat the Communists. So Harriman certainly sympathized with the general idea of trying to get a major change in Diem's policies and trying to get rid of Nhu. And, of course, this is the sense of the famous Rocking Chair Statement in Hyannis Port that the President made about there would have to be a change in policies and also in personalities. At that stage we were zeroing in on Nhu, not on Diem. And the whole idea, the whole hope was to peel Nhu off and get him and Madame Nhu the hell out of the country, out of the way, and maybe we could use Diem and his own charisma and his own zeal, his own intelligence for putting things back on the road again.

O'BRIEN: Well, when the suicides start, is there a... Well, of course the suicides beginning and developing, and Nolting, you know, taking his cruise in the Mediterranean and all sort of come together at the same time. Is there any kind of move or mood that you can determine here in finding a way of maybe working around Diem?

SULLIVAN: Oh, yes. It was very definitely a desire to try to work not so much around Diem as to work Diem around. That is to say as I say initially get rid of Nhu and Madame Nhu -- that was the main thing, get rid of the family. And then try to bring in association with him, people who were competent, a great many of whom were all, of course, coming to us and complaining about their plight, and most of whom were being squeezed out one by one from positions of authority.

O'BRIEN: Well, this Saturday morning meeting and the so-called telegram of the 24th of August has been cited as the point in which the U.S. at least gave the Generals Kim [LeVan Kim] and Khiem [Tran Thien Khiem] some ideas that we would support them. Is there any unofficial contact that you enrolled prior to that?

SULLIVAN: Oh, yes. A lot of it. Mainly through CIA people who... In saying that, I don't mean that they were operating independently on their own. They were operating under guidance that they were getting from the top.

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O'BRIEN: Is the guidance telling them to perhaps encourage the generals to...

SULLIVAN: Certainly didn't discourage them...

O'BRIEN: ... take some hand in the matter?

SULLIVAN: ... as to keeping in contact with them and keeping informed of what their intentions were. And I would say from the generals' point of view they would be correct in assuming that they were being encouraged.

O'BRIEN: Well, what's Taylor's role in this? Is Taylor, perhaps, his contact with Big Minh?

SULLIVAN: No, I think those contacts with Big Minh have been overplayed. I think Taylor.... Taylor was one of those who felt that our army attitude in the past, our military attitude and the attitude of the South Vietnamese military which had been formed in our image, was all wrong as a way in which to count a counterinsurgency battle. So he was, therefore, totally sympathetic with the idea of trying to change the military posture of the South Vietnamese and try to get it away from the "Hanging Sam" Williams rigidity and get it into something that was going to be workable. He was, therefore, sympathetic with a general need to do some changes in the Vietnamese structure. But he felt very strongly, and, of course, said so at the time and later that, perhaps, Diem would bring down so much structure in the countryside that he'd never be able to get it rebuilt. And he was not for undercutting Diem. He was fully in agreement trying to get brother Nhu out.

I remember he and I went out there one time just before he became chairman of the joint chiefs. And we spent -- I guess Durbrow was our ambassador. No, Fritz was our ambassador, Fritz Nolting. We spent.... Nolting had a dinner. And during that dinner, brother Nhu and Max and I went into a small room, just the three of us, for I think two hours practically of a monologue by Nhu. And when we came back and joined the dinner guests afterwards, when they all left, Max turned to me and said, "I think that guy is nuts. He's either nuts or else he's blind." Well, first he said, "What did you make of that?" I said, "That was a very confusing sort of conversation." He said, "I think the guy is nuts." He had no love for Nhu, I know. But that's where he formed his prime opinion of him aside from the reports. But he did feel very strongly that collapse of Diem would mean collapse of the countryside.

O'BRIEN: Well, in that meeting that took place in which the telegram instructions were sent out to Saigon to.... Was there any staging of that, in a sense, that it took place on Saturday morning? And what determined the timing of that? Was it the...

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SULLIVAN: No, I don't think I was in that meeting. I would say probably the only reason that it may have taken place on a Saturday morning was that just in

the whole rush of business around here in Washington, one of the few times in which you can get an under secretary for long enough to sit down to a meeting is on a Saturday morning. I think it may have just transpired that way.

O'BRIEN: Well, there's been some criticism, and particularly from Max Taylor, about Hilsman's reporting of this in his book. Hilsman says that, you know, they were out of town and they cleared with -- Krulak supposedly cleared it with Taylor in a restaurant. And it was cleared with Rusk on the phone. It was cleared with McNamara, you know, with Gilpatric. What do you recollect from.... Do you recall anything from that?

SULLIVAN: I don't recall.... First of all, I don't recall that I was in the meeting. I do recall shortly after the cable had gone, maybe within the next few days, that we were getting some grumbles from the Pentagon about it. And I don't know whether those were second thoughts or whether they represented the fact that the individual with whom it was allegedly cleared never had actually cleared it. So I remember the cable more post hoc that I do in its immediacy. And I don't really recall that I was in the meeting that.... Do you know the date?

O'BRIEN: August 24 was the date. And the telegram went out...

SULLIVAN: August 24, '63?

O'BRIEN: Right. The telegram went out the 25th, I believe, or maybe the 24th.

SULLIVAN: I have the vague idea I was over on the beach -- out of the Washington area at that time.

O'BRIEN: Well, what's the significance of Lodge [Henry C. Lodge] going out there?

SULLIVAN: Well, I think Cabot was fed up without a job. He had been working in this Atlantic [Institute] -- whatever it's called, an organization sponsored by NATO -- publicity and so forth, and he wrote a book out of it. He came down. He had a commission as a major general in the army reserve. And the year before he had asked if he could spend it in Vietnam. Obviously, that was good politics. Vietnam was becoming an area of interest and it would be good politically in those days to be associated with Vietnam. Also I think he was interested. That was declined and he was instead given a job and did his reserve tour in the Pentagon in some function, I think the intelligence area but specifically dealing with Vietnam.

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The following year, '63, he put in his application again and again said he wanted to go to Vietnam. Somebody called me from McNamara's office, I guess it was and said, "What

would you think about Cabot doing his duty out there?" I said, "Well, this is not a diplomatic or a State Department problem. This is a political problem. Let me check it with the White House." So I called over to the White House and asked what anybody over there thought about it. And this was just at the time that the President was looking for a new ambassador. I don't know whether he had Cabot in mind before. I think he knew that Cabot wanted something to do. He may have just put two and two together. Or he may have been thinking of this before. I really don't know. But the next thing I got was a call back saying that the President would like to see Cabot at the White House. So I set up the arrangement for him to go there.

And it's amusing to me because I was invited to a lunch for Cabot that same day that he was seeing the President. And the lunch was over here at 1925 "F" Street. It was a function which was associated with the printing of a book that he had just -- the publishing of this book on Atlantic Union Now or something of that sort. As we were leaving the lunch I said to him -- in my own mind thinking entirely in terms of this reserve duty job that he had asked for -- I said, "Did you get anything this morning from the President with respect to the business of whether or not you'll be going to Vietnam?" And he almost dropped his teeth because apparently what the President had just proposed to him half an hour before the lunch was would he go there as ambassador. And this was strictly between the two of them, I guess. I don't know who else knew about it, maybe Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]. Dean Rusk must've known. He was totally surprised. He just assumed that I knew about it. But I didn't know about it. I was just talking about this major general's reserve tour of duty. And it wasn't until about a week later that I found out that what he was being offered was to go there as ambassador. So I don't know whether this had all come to the President's horizon beforehand or whether it just was this coincidence.

O'BRIEN: It's been suggested in some of the literature on the coup that Hilsman and Harriman and Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] sitting down on that Saturday morning was a kind of cabal. And it may have been timed on Saturday morning when everyone else was out of town. You know, you know all these men intimately. Is there any reason to believe that that might be...

SULLIVAN: Well, I think first of all, as far as Harriman is concerned, the idea of doing something of this sort, of taking advantage of the absence of the other people to do it is totally uncharacteristic. He would have loved to -- if they were going to object -- have had the confrontation and bowl them right over right then and there. I think he would have felt that he had the President's cachet on this and could have gotten it and would have been

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happy to have it out right then and there. So I don't think anything on his part would involve trying an end run on this.

The same with Mike Forrestal who was in contact with the President, knew the President's thinking on it.

Now, Roger, this may have occurred to Roger, and may have been a bureaucratic maneuver on his part. But I don't know that at all. The point I'm making is that I think Harriman and Forrestal in signing the cable were fully aware that they were acting in accordance with what the President's wishes were. I don't think there was any maneuver to do this on their part while the rest of them were away.

O'BRIEN: When do you become aware that Lodge has been ordered to, as well as the mission in Saigon, has been ordered to at least keep contact and give support, encouragement to a coup?

SULLIVAN: Oh, from the very beginning of the contacts on this. About this time, and one other thing that fits into this business of Roger's weekend activities and so forth, for various reasons -- and they have only partly to do with this -- he had fallen out of favor in the Pentagon. He was having conflicts with.... See, he went to West Point and left the army at the stage of being captain. Over in the Pentagon they still had some difficulty, some of the three and four star generals were being told what to do by Captain Hilsman. Also, he was a bit of a hair shirt in his treatment of some of them over there. So it got to the point where they were just really not working with him very much. And this is when.... You asked when did I get involved in Vietnam affairs. I'd have to check specifically. But I'm quite sure that I was on vacation for the last either two or three weeks of August over in Rehoboth. When I came back from that vacation -- now, this would have been after that cable -- I was told that Roger's bridges with the Pentagon had been pretty well burned and that on the issue of Vietnam, they were just going to have to find some other way of dealing with the Pentagon. He had made one of these trips, I think, out there with Bob McNamara, Bob was about to take another trip in September, I guess, early September of '63. Maybe you've got the date on it.

O'BRIEN: He went a little later about the end of September, I think, with Taylor. Wasn't it?

SULLIVAN: That's right. They wanted somebody from the State Department but they specified they did not want Hilsman. So this is when I began to get involved because I was selected to be the State Department representative. This was the first of about seven trips, I think, that I took in and out of Vietnam. [Interruption] That's when I did get involved. At that stage, then, of course, I became intimately in the middle of the whole thing and became aware of all the communications going back and forth. In fact, one of the things that the President asked me to do on that first trip I went out there was to try to give him some explanation as to why the hell he was getting these totally optimistic reports from the military and these negative reports from the embassy. And second of all, why there seemed to be friction between Cabot and the military.

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O'BRIEN: Just one very short question, was there ever any indication that there were

serious contacts going on between Nhu and the North Vietnamese, and was there any fear of that here in Washington?

SULLIVAN: There was one flash period when we had some fear of that. By this time people had lost totally any confidence or trust in Nhu. He was taking more and more narcotics. And his whole behavior was getting more and more erratic. There was some suggestion that he had at least said and some indication that they probably had some hopes of making some sort of deals with the North Vietnamese. It wasn't quite clear what they were. Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop], I think, versed this out in print very rapidly shortly after we got it. That was about it.

The basic disillusionment with Nhu was not on fear of what he was doing with the North Vietnamese. It was what he was doing and destroying the whole prospect for his brother's regime to have any popular base.

O'BRIEN: Well, looking back at it, how do you assess the coup and, you know, the killing of Diem and Nhu? Does it bring about the deterioration that takes place?

SULLIVAN: It brought about the deterioration, there's no question. I think that what -- had there been something very surgically and neatly removing Nhu and Madame Nhu and preserving Diem, that would have been the best possible deal. When Diem made it quite clear that he was not going to break off with his brother and permit his brother to be taken out of the country and exiled then it became apparent that the only way out of this confrontation was that Diem also would have to go in the process. But I think the killing of the two of them was something which came as a shock to all of us and Cabot, particularly. Whether the deterioration would have been quite so total if it hadn't been for the killing, I don't know. There's no question there was a deterioration.

The other feature of this is that you have to remember that deterioration was accelerated by the fact that the North Vietnamese pounced upon the coup to throw in their regular units at that time. That's when they started sending their main force units down South. Just in terms of the weather it couldn't have been done in a worse time of the year because it was done in November, the beginning of the dry season, when they could run their troops in there. If it had been done in the beginning of July, they wouldn't have been able to exploit it. Just in terms of an operation and all the consequences of it, obviously were not well-examined by the guys who did it. They had no plan how to exploit it once they'd done it. They pulled a coup and then they had really no sense of how to take over.

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O'BRIEN: There's just one thing that just came to mind. I think it might be worthwhile getting on the record in light of Kenny O'Donnell's *Life* magazine article. In there he says on October 2, 1963 that the President ordered the withdrawal of a thousand troops as a part of a greater overall plan to withdraw all troops from Vietnam by 1965. Do you have any reflections on that?

SULLIVAN: Well, it's an intriguing bit from Kenny because what happened on that occasion -- this is another one of these, or maybe it was one of these trips I went out with McNamara and Taylor. And we did a report. Max had a draft of it in which he did speak about these troops that were moving out. They were a construction battalion, as I recall, that had completed their job. And he did have this business about troops out by '65. And when I saw this portion of the draft -- we were each drafting a separate chapter of this report then exchanging the chapters around. When I got Max's chapter -- we all had offices in the old MACV [U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] out there -- I went to Bob McNamara and I said, "I just can't buy this. This is totally unrealistic. We're not going to get troops out in '65. We mustn't submit anything phony as this to the President." And Bob agreed and he went in and talked to Max, and Max agreed to scrub it. Then on the plane on the way we talked about it a bit. Max said, "Well, goddamnit, we've got to make these people put their noses to the wheel -- or the grindstone or whatever. If we don't give them some indication that we're going to get out sometime, they're just going to be leaning on us forever. So that's why I had it in there." I said, "Well, I can understand that. But if this becomes a matter of public record, it would be considered a phony and a fraud and an effort to nullify the American public and just not be considered honest."

We came back here, that particular trip, and I remember I had breakfast at Harriman's house with Harriman and Hilsman. I told them about this, told them what happened and they agreed. Then Harriman and I went to the White House to participate in a meeting with -- I think John McCone was on that trip with us. Anyway, McNamara, Taylor, McCone, myself, those who had been on the trip plus Dean Rusk and Averell and I guess Ros Gilpatric. Anyway, when the meeting finished, when we made our report to the President and discussed this, Rusk and McNamara and Tylor went into the President's office with him. The rest of us got in our cars and went home. They went in there to draft up some little thing to say to the press about all this. We got back over here and when the statement came out for the press, damned if it didn't have back in it again this 1965 bit. And I really got quite annoyed. I called Bob McNamara up and said, "All the arguments I used on this thing, why in the hell is it back in the public print again?" I must say his reaction, comment to me was not all that convincing at the time. I thought it was just some sort of slip. But then again, a couple of

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weeks later, he testified up on the Hill on something that it came out again. Again I telephoned and I said, "You know, you're really giving me problems, a credibility problem." Now, Bob's such....

[END OF TAPE]

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