

Robert H. Johnson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 8/29/74
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Johnson was a member of the National Security Council [NSC]. In this interview, Johnson discusses his personal experience working for the NSC, the transition into John F. Kennedy's administration, and how the NSC handled conflict in Southeast Asia among other issues.

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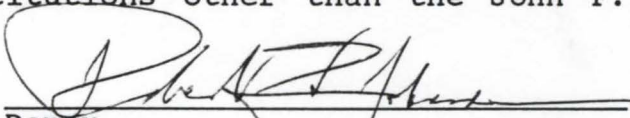
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Robert H. Johnson – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT H. JOHNSON

August 29, 1974
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Let me begin, Mr. Johnson, by asking you to identify yourself, and particularly by reference to your career up to 1961 and your service on the National Security staff under the Kennedy Administration.

JOHNSON: My name is Robert H. Johnson. I came to the government in 1951, in July, after having got a Ph.D. ^{at HARVARD [UNIVERSITY]} and having been an instructor in the Government Department at Harvard for two years. Initially I was very briefly an assistant to the Assistant Executive Secretary, Hugh Foley. And then sometime within the first year, I became assistant to the Executive Secretary, ^[James] Jimmy ^{Lays} ~~Wald~~. I almost left the NSC [National Security Council] staff in 1954 because I had basically an

administrative job, and I was quite discontent. But then ~~I was moved over~~. As a result of expressing this discontent, I was moved over to something called the Special Staff, which was ~~a staff~~ the first substantive staff created within the NSC staff. Prior to that time, all of us on the staff performed ~~substantive~~ some substantive, as well as administrative, functions, but there was primarily a kind of administrative staff. And I became a member and secretary of the Special Staff. Then, in 1959, as a result of some other changes on the NSC staff, I became what was called the Director of the Planning Board Secretariat, which is not a very meaningful title. I was Executive Secretary of the NSC Planning Board, which ^{was} the Assistant Secretary level body below the NSC. Then I was Chairman of the Planning Board assistants, which was the ~~level~~ inter-departmental level below that which did a lot of the actual drafting of the NSC papers. And I was there ~~until the~~ at the time that the Kennedy Administration came in.

MOSS:

Just for the record, would you distinguish that from the OCB [Operations Coordinating Board]?

JOHNSON: Well, ~~the Operations Coordinating Board~~, the theoretical distinction was that the Planning Board was concerned with the development of policy recommendations for the Council; The Operations Coordinating Board was concerned with implementation of NSC and related policies.

My role as chairman of the Board assistants I think was perhaps the most important role that I performed during that time, ~~and~~ I was a fairly active Chairman.

MOSS: What sort of functions ^{would} ~~were~~ you performing? What did it require you to do?

JOHNSON: Well, it mainly required me to sit ⁱⁿ on an awful ^{lot of} meetings, chairing meetings, not infrequently all ^{day} meetings. And then, as I said, I also served as Executive Secretary of the Planning Board, ^{That} ~~which~~ meant that I was a note-taker; that is, basically, I kept the record on drafting changes and that sort of thing in the Planning Board, and handled the administrative side of it in the sense of getting the papers out, ^{and} revised versions of ~~the~~ papers out, after they had ~~have~~ been discussed, and so on.

MOSS: All right, there were a number of ^{who were} you, there as career people, as it were, ^{or} at least as long-

term appointment people, who were there when the Kennedy Administration came in. Yourself, Sam [Samuel E.], Belk, Bromley Smith and a number of others.

JOHNSON: Well, those were the two that you remember because they were the two that survived.

MOSS: Yes, all right well . . .

JOHNSON: almost everybody else left.

MOSS: Okay. Tell some of the people who left and sort of why they did; and then why those two and you stayed.

JOHNSON: Well, I'm not absolutely sure about this but what happened was that there was a hiatus initially, during which those of us who were there on the NSC staff sat around without an awful lot to do, although we would get individual assignments as I recall, some assignments anyway, during that time, but the new Administration really hadn't decided, I think, what to do with the staff.

Then we were, as I remember, brought in individually and told whether we were going to be kept at some stage. My recollection, but it's . . .

MOSS: Who brought you in to talk to you?

JOHNSON: Well, I think that we came I'm not absolutely sure about who it was that we saw, whether it was [McGeorge] Bundy, [Walt W.] Rostow, or a combination of the two of them. ~~That's~~ And again, one's recollections are so faulty on this kind of thing, but that's that's my recollection. ~~And~~ my recollection also is that the thing that crystallized some action was the Bay of Pigs business, but I may be wrong about that. I know that some people had been told, I think Jimmy Lay had been told fairly early on that he would not be kept, but there were a number of us who weren't sure. But I ~~think the~~ I believe it was after the Bay of Pigs business when they tried to ^{really} get themselves ~~really~~ organized that some of these decisions were made. ~~And~~ why some of us were kept and why some of us weren't is mysterious as far as I'm concerned. I presume what they did was they talked around to other people about us, they, in some cases, I think, tested us a little bit with some assignments. ~~I think~~ as I recall, I got some assignments. I don't remember that I got any terribly meaningful ones during that time. ¶ In any event,

they were obviously looking for a different kind of staff person from the sort that we had had before. I mean the staff that had been there before has served ~~to the~~ ^{an} institution, basically, the NSC. The staff that they were trying to create was much more a presidential staff. Now, obviously, that distinction is not an absolute one because the institution itself was a presidential institution. But it was a staff ~~think~~ that was characterized in general by a great deal of caution, it had had to make its way from a time -- you have to understand some of the history -- ~~from a time~~ back in 1947 when the NSC was first set up and when there were a lot of misgivings on the part of the agencies as to the NSC and the way that it might get involved in their work, particularly on the part of the State Department. ~~think~~ I've written an organizational history of the NSC which spells some of this out in a very bureaucrat^{rese} kind of language.)

So that there was a kind of tradition, you might say, of caution because of an awareness that one had to maneuver carefully in order to avoid backlash from the State Department particularly,

but from the other participants as well in the whole process. ~~And~~ that was one of the things that struck one first when he came to work there ~~and~~ as I did in '51, ~~to~~ how damned cautious the approach was on the seemingly routine matters like memo writing and so on, that there were certain formulas that one used in order to avoid running into difficulty.

¶ Now? I think that changed to a degree with the Eisenhower Administration and the creation of the Special Assistant, who still ~~was~~ by and large ran an institution, the NSC, rather than served as the personal advisor to the President-- although to a degree that I'm not clear about, he did serve as an advisor to the President, but the NSC staff did get into substantive matters to a greater degree and ^{in a} much more consistent way.

~~And~~ I think this did make for some degree of change in the kind of person. But still, basically, it was, a ^{pretty} ~~kind of~~ cautious, ^{kind of} operation and you got really socialized to that ~~kind of~~ whole set of attitudes there. ~~And~~ I think that was one of the things that was a limitation on the use of a number of the people there who were able in terms of

~~often in terms of~~² basic intelligence and so on, understanding of problems and what²not. But they had been imbued with this kind of atmosphere of caution.

MOSS: And then how did this appear to change into a presidential staff? Just what do you mean by that?

JOHNSON: Well, I think the evolution was rather gradual.

~~Initially~~ It became much more of a substantive staff. We were not serving an institution primarily. We were not engaged in a paper-pushing kind of operation that all of us were involved in to some degree all through the Eisenhower Administration and earlier in the Truman Administration. And² much more we were. . . . Well, the staff that survived and the staff that was brought in was given various sorts of functional areas of responsibility. ¶ "Given" is a kind of exaggeration because the way it actually worked, as you may know, is that we learned by process of assignment what our area of responsibility was, which created some conflicts and uncertainties initially. For example, ~~Bob~~^{Bob} [Robert W.]^{Bob} Komer and I split South Asia and⁺ annoyed the hell out of him,

I think, that I had some kind of uncertain claim to India while he was working Pakistan. Similarly, it annoyed the hell out of me that he kept getting into the West New Guinea business when I thought that was more. . . . It didn't annoy me, I mean, it was useful to a point; but there was a certain amount of tension and uncertainty just because of the mode of operation which was informal, the Kennedy style, all this stuff.

MOSS: We'll get into an example of that, by the way, on the Vietnam memoranda that I ^{have} brought down. There ~~a~~re a couple of Komer ones in there amongst your's and Rostow's.

JOHNSON: I'm not surprised, ^{yes.} ~~Yeah~~ So that one found out gradually, as I say, what one's area of assignment was. ~~And~~ I found out that my area of assignment was basically East Asia; ~~and~~ that's what I spent most of my time on, although I was involved to a slight degree in the India business. I was wooed by the Pakistani embassy there for a while, interestingly, because they were just getting ready to crank up some difficulty over Kashmir.

MOSS: ^{Yes,} ~~Yeah, I remember?~~ what happened?

JOHNSON: They were trying to get some leverage in the Administration and they took me out to lunch and all this stuff.

MOSS: [Mohammed Ayub Kahn] Ayub was also agitating for a guarantee of U.S. help in case of invasion from anybody. . . .

JOHNSON: Yes, I ~~was~~ ^{had} forgotten that if I ~~had~~ ^{had} known it.

MOSS: . . . too at that point. ~~Yeah~~ Yeso

JOHNSON: ~~I hate to . . .~~ I'm going to hate to read this stuff I know

[Laughter]

JOHNSON: I've had some experience with kind of business . . .

MOSS: I know, I know, I know.

JOHNSON: . . . and it comes off so disorganized. You have a certain sympathy for ^[Dwight D.] Eisenhower and his press conferences after you've had some experience with this sort of thing.

MOSS: That's right, that's right. The conversational thing just does not read like smooth prose. There's no way it's going to.

JOHNSON: I know it, I know it. Well, let's see, where do we go from here.

MOSS: All right. I think where we go from here is to talk a little bit about the. . . . Well, first of all ~~let me ask~~ I intended to ask you about [Andrew J.] Goodpaster, and what he did in that little interim period for the first

two or three months. ~~was~~

JOHNSON: I don't know.

MOSS: All I see him doing really is passing on things from the State Department on appointments, for instance, that kind of thing.

JOHNSON: I really don't know. He wasn't involved in Bundy's staff meetings to the best of my recollection.

MOSS: Okay. Because all I see is ~~the~~ initially, when things come over from State Secretariat requesting an appointment for ambassador so-and-so or somebody or other, in the first two or three months, these are all still going to Goodpaster as they had been I presume in the Eisenhower Administration.

JOHNSON: I didn't know . . .

MOSS: That didn't change for about three or four months. ~~I~~ I wondered what his role was.

JOHNSON: I didn't know anything about it.

MOSS: Okay. The next thing is to ask about Bromley Smith and his roles. And ~~whether it . . .~~ exactly what it was; how you perceived it; and how it changed if you perceived a change.

JOHNSON: ~~That is not~~ It's partly a matter of recollection and partly a matter of some unclarity about his role, even when I was on the NSC staff. But Brom, of course, became formally the Executive Secretary ^{to} of the Council, which meant that he ^{handled} ~~held~~ that job in so far as there was a job of paper-pushing and so on. But my perception of Brom's role was that he was a kind of administrative chief of staff for Bundy, handling an awful lot of communications for Bundy; that is, he was a communicator—and he ^{is} ~~was~~ quite good at this because he ^{is} ~~was~~ an expert bureaucrat--back and forth between Bundy and the agencies. Beyond that, I really don't have a clear recollection of it. I know that there was a certain amount of tension. It's probably come out. I remember that Bob Komer used to be upset by Brom's role.

~~MOSS: why?~~

JOHNSON: Because it was unclear how it was related sometimes to the things that we were supposed to be doing substantively, I think. Although I don't remember ever having any particular problem with Bromley. Of course, I knew him. I had been a colleague for a long time. Bob ^{knew him} too because Bob had been ^{the} in NSC business for. . .

← Anyway, there was a certain amount of vagueness and uncertainty, but basically my sense was ^{that} his role was kind of an Administrative Chief of staff for Bundy with a ~~big~~ ^{big} role in the communications between the White House and the agencies.

MOSS: Okay, let me ask you to comment of the Bundy-Rostow relationship. How did that shake down? What did you see the two of them doing initially, and how did it change up to the time of the Thanksgiving Day Massacre and shift over to State?

JOHNSON: Well, you see, initially, when you say initially, the first two or three months, whatever it was, we weren't that involved; I wasn't that involved. People like Bob Komer that were brought in ^{new I think WERE} involved to a greater degree. ~~But~~ ^{so} I'm not clear about that initial period, but my general recollection of it is, as your notes suggest here, that there was a kind of division of the world basically in which Rostow handled the LDC [less-developed countries] ^{part of the world} and Bundy handled Europe and East-West relations and so on; with Rostow also being involved in economic kinds of issues that went beyond LDC's. I think that was the rough division of labor. In addition to that, Walt'

had these sessions--~~of~~ which I'm sure you^{are} aware of through other interviews--with the President periodically. Just kind of brain-storming sessions, as I understood them, in which he was throwing^{out} various kinds of ideas. It was part of Kennedy's effort, I think, to search for new ideas and perspectives. And ~~of~~ as far as I know, he was not constrained there by his normal day-to-day responsibilities. But I don't know a lot about that except ~~for~~ the existence of those sessions.

MOSS: ^{Okay} The first memo I see from you is late April 1961.

JOHNSON: That's very likely.

MOSS: Does this suit your recollection?

JOHNSON: ^{Yes} ~~Yeah~~ I think that's probably it. I may have volunteered some things earlier, I have a feeling that I did, ~~but~~

MOSS: ~~As you~~ As you worked with Rostow[?] particularly through ~~the~~ through this Vietnam thing[?] how did you see his role change over that first eleven months? Did it, or did it remain fairly stable?

JOHNSON: Well, my recollection is that it was pretty stable, that is[?] that Walt was the Vietnam guy in the White House from the time that I began being involved in Vietnam, it's my recollection.

He was named as the formal representative of the White House NSC staff on the Vietnam Task Force when that was set up ~~that is~~ the standing one. There was the [Roswell L.] Gilpatric Task Force ~~that~~. I forget his relationship to that whether he was a member of that or not.

MOSS: No, ~~I don't think~~ He wasn't a member of that.
No.

JOHNSON: I don't think so, no. But when they set up the new standing mechanism, he was the member formally. I was the actual participant in the meetings. ~~and~~ I think that's the way it ~~was~~ ran all the way through. I recall having made some comments on the Gilpatric Task Force Report, but I had not been involved in any way in the Report itself, to the best of my recollection. That is, I got it cold and I was responding to it without really any significant background on what had gone into it.

MOSS: That's interesting because I have that memo of yours in this packet. ~~Yeah?~~

JOHNSON: Oh you do?

MOSS: ~~Yeah?~~ Yes.

JOHNSON: I sort of shudder at the thought of looking at some of these things.

[Laughter]

JOHNSON: ~~Some of the~~ Some of my later memos that got into the Pentagon Papers ^{it} is really kind of amazing. ~~The~~ government longer version, ~~you~~ You know, because you were shooting-off memos all the time during that phase. ~~And you can't~~ ~~you~~ have no recollection exactly of what you were saying.

MOSS: Let me ask about Bundy and Rostow in their operating styles and so on. Was there a conflict of any sort in the way they approached things that created difficulties at times or. . .

JOHNSON: Well they're very different kinds of personalities, as you are in no doubt aware. ~~And~~ one of the reasons why I left when Walt went to the State Department was because I found it difficult, more difficult to imagine myself working for Bundy on a regular basis. I just found ^{him} ~~it~~ a little bit more difficult to work for ~~him~~ ^{him} I admired him a great deal, ^{was} but he ~~is~~ ^{was} not an easy person to relate to.

MOSS: In ~~what~~ ways?

JOHNSON: Well, Bundy was sort of super intelligent ~~and~~ ^{and} he not only is super intelligent, but he conveys that

impression to you. ~~And~~ one way of expressing it that I've often expressed it is that when you're in talking to him, you always have the feeling that he's about two paragraphs ahead of you and wished to hell you'd get to where he was.

[Laughter]


MOSS: I understand. I interviewed him and I understand exactly what you mean.

JOHNSON: And that was kind of upsetting because it made you wonder why you bothered to say anything at all ^{if he was already} . . . I think it was a dangerous tendency, actually, in retrospect. I mean, there is a danger in being so, you know . . .

MOSS: Yes.

JOHNSON: . . . you maybe don't listen to what is being said ^d in the meanwhile.

MOSS: Uh, uh.

JOHNSON: But in any event, I found it rather difficult to talk to somebody like that. Now Walt is a very different kind of person. He's a warm human being. I had serious disagreements with Walt on the Vietnam business from the very beginning ^d or from at least a very early stage ^d ~~Six . . .~~ 

And differences with him on other things;
Questions about his approach to problems. But
on the other hand, he was a very great guy to work
for, at least he was in my experience. He gave
you a lot of freedom; he's a warm person; he
gave you the feeling that he really cared about
what you were doing; and he was willing to have
discursive sessions with you--he liked that
himself, I think, ~~that was~~ probably one of his
faults was ^{that} he tended to be a little bit too
discursive ~~and~~ the very opposite from Bundy
in that respect who was always concise, you
know, everything was very ~~very~~ neat and ordered.

MOSS:

^{Yes}
~~Yeah, yeah~~ Of course, one of the reasons that
is at least attributed to the move to State was
that Rostow was too much this way for the
operating style of both Kennedy and Bundy.

JOHNSON:

That's quite plausible, ~~yeah~~ yes

MOSS:

I wondered if you could substantiate that ^{result} ~~at all~~

JOHNSON:

You see; I don't have enough of a sense, except
from what I've read and what I understand from
sort of general sorts of things that everybody
understands about the Kennedy Administration;
I didn't have anything to do with it.

I don't know enough about Kennedy's style but ^{to me} ~~that~~ that does seem/plausible that there was ^{made it} a difference in operating style here that . . .

MOSS: You can't recall critical instances of confrontation and that kind of thing . . .

JOHNSON: Confrontation, no, no, I don't think so.

MOSS: . . . where this made a difference or ^{it} was just a cumulative kind of thing. No, I think that

JOHNSON: [←] in a way they complimented each other rather ~~than~~ ^{nicely} ~~isolate~~ In places like staff meetings, I mean ~~Walt was always~~ Walt's pension and his weakness is the big picture. I mean, he's the great integrator; give him three facts and he'll have a theory. I've seen him do it literally. ~~And~~ ^{it} it was a great characteristic in some ways. I mean, it's sort of exciting to be around. On the other hand, it also leads to the grossest sort of error. ^{I think} Whereas Bundy was much more the precise, let's get this concrete kind of thing. I've ^{known both} ~~done work with~~ the Bundy brothers, and although they have differences they're somewhat similar, I think, in that respect.

But I never saw any great conflicts. ~~mean~~ sure there were differences of view and there probably were instances where Bundy got impatient with Rostow, but I don't remember any great confrontations ~~or~~ ^{or} anything at staff meetings.

MOSS: Okay, let me ask about some of the other people around who were ^e sort of in and out. [Arthur M., Jr.] Schlesinger and [Ralph A.] Dungan particularly are sort of in and out of NSC Staff, on the fringes, doing this and doing that. How did you see them?

JOHNSON: Well, that's pretty much the way I saw them operate.

MOSS: Okay. This is what I have from other sources.

JOHNSON: I didn't know Schlesinger before he showed up there. I knew Ralph from some years back in the government somewhat, not well. ~~And~~ they got into various things. They obviously, both of them, tended to concentrate on Latin America so far as Bundy work was concerned. But I can remember Ralph getting into something that I got into which was ~~that~~ ^{that} CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] wanted to muck around in

the Phillipine elections. ~~And~~ somebody had gotten Ralph interested in this, and he got me then to look into it. ~~and~~ I went over and talked to the State Department. ^{The} State Department was all opposed to it. I don't remember anything much more about it. But that's the one recollection I have of having been involved in any way really with Ralph on anything. ¶ The only thing I can remember with Schlesinger was that I did do a memo on West New Guinea or something that found its way to him--I think maybe Bob Komer sent it to him--from which I got some indirect reaction. But they came to the ~~staff~~ meetings but were operating pretty independently with the ~~president~~ and I guess with Bundy.

MOSS: ^{Then} ~~and~~ there was no uneasiness about this kind of in and out business? ~~and~~

JOHNSON: I wasn't aware of any. I mean ~~and~~ [Richard N.] Dick Goodwin was in pretty much the same role too; he came to the staff meetings, at least periodically.

MOSS: What about [Theodore C.] Sorensen, did he show up much?

JOHNSON: No. I never saw him at a staff meeting. No, my only contact ever with Sørensen was when I was involved in a Korean Task Force ^{which} was set up that year and I got involved in a rather peculiar relationship actually, which might be interesting.

MOSS: Yes, would you talk a little about it.

JOHNSON: But anyway, ~~Sørensen~~ prior to, I think it was an NSC ^{meeting} where this thing was to be considered; Sørensen convened some kind of a meeting of principal people like [Walter P.] McConaughy, he was then the Assistant Secretary on the State Department.

MOSS: That's the fourth pronunciation.

JOHNSON: McConaughy?

MOSS: I've heard "McCon-a-phy" and "McCon-a-hee" and . . .

JOHNSON: Oh, it's "McCon-a-ghee."

MOSS: McCon-a-ghee. Good.

JOHNSON: McCon-a-ghee. ~~And~~ I can't remember his exact role except that there were some conflicts and differences ~~and~~ and he was trying to get it sorted out and trying to get the paper work sorted out. ~~And~~ he convened this whole meeting. Well, the


awkwardness in that whole thing for me was that I got. . . . McConaughy/^{who rather}was a very cautious bureaucrat, to say the least, had this damned task force set up--and I don't think he really wanted it, probably--on Korea. ~~and~~ he was worried, I think--that's my guess--about how he related to the White House on this because there was obvious White House interest, that's why the task force was set up.

MOSS: Who set it up?

JOHNSON: I can't remember exactly. . .

MOSS: ^{Yes?}
~~Yeah~~ okay.

JOHNSON: . . . But it was after the coup in Korea. ~~and~~ he had just come in, so he asked Walt Rostow, I think it was, if they'd lend me to ^{be} a participant in the task force. Not to be a participant, I'm sorry, to help him in drafting papers and so on for the task force. So I got in the peculiar position--Walt volunteered me--~~I got in the peculiar position~~ of being sort of a staff guy on loan to the State Department and yet having an NSC staff role as a critic of this whole operation. I was a member of the task force, I believe. I can't remember my formal role--I was also a member of

a working group or something that did a lot of the actual paper drafting. ~~And~~ then when the whole damn thing was done, then I was back in the NSC White House where they were commenting on our work. And of course I wasn't altogether happy with it because various kinds of  compromises had been made. So then . . .

MOSS: How did the ^{other} members of the Task Force regard you in that situation?

JOHNSON: Well, what I remember about it was that McConaughy got quite upset because I think he saw this as a device to make sure that he didn't have any trouble from the White House. In fact, it didn't work that way at all, ~~because~~ the way it worked was that I knew where the bodies were buried. ~~And~~ so then I wrote critical memos as I remember it anyway to Rostow or whatever and got people concerned there about some of these issues that I felt had gotten buried in the report ^{or} ~~where~~ hadn't been dealt with adequately or whatever. ~~And I think that was~~ I believe it was in connection with the Sorensen meeting that he got rather upset. ¶ But I think it reflected the

Kennedy mode of operation which was to not be very concerned with that kind of bureaucratic question. I was very sensitive to it from the beginning. I realized what kind of position I was being put in because I had been in the bureaucracy long enough to have a sense of that. But they didn't give a damn ~~mean~~ ^{you} could do both things, ^{all} ~~for~~ one government. ~~one~~

MOSS: ~~Yeah, yeah~~ Yes

JOHNSON: It might be handy, you know, healthy. From one point of view, it was because it did mean that I got a kind of insider's involvement in the thing which was then helpful when I played my other role.

MOSS: To press this whole thing a little further, how did the NSC staff ^A Bundy, Rostow and the rest of the people over there ^A regard McConaughy ^{as FE} [For East bureau]? ~~And~~ ^A were they a moving force behind the change to get him out?

JOHNSON: I don't know enough about it. I don't know this personnel business at all.

MOSS: ~~Yes.~~ ^{Yeah} Okay.

JOHNSON: My sense is that they were not at all happy with him. ^{He was a very cautious guy.} He was identified with the Walter

Robertson policies and so on. ~~And~~ it was a kind of a bureaucratic choice ~~I mean~~ to put him in that job. But that's only a vague and general sense. I couldn't document it in any way. ~~And~~ I know nothing much about those personnel changes except I do remember that prior to the so-called Thanksgiving Day Massacre there was some conversation or some references in the Bundy staff meeting that indicated--I think Ralph Dungan was involved in that--~~that indicates~~ a certain unhappiness with [Chester] Bowles. But that's ~~that's~~ all I know, really.

MOSS: I'm going to skip the time that is covered by these memoranda that I've brought down, and ask you to talk a little bit about the aftermath of the Thanksgiving Day Massacre for you and for Rostow. | The move to the Policy Planning Council, how did this come to your attention? Do you remember when you first sensed the move?

JOHNSON: Well, ~~I think~~ you know, I never have my ear to the ground; never have had, wherever I've worked on this business of personnel changes.

~~I don't~~ I'm not interested in that kind of gossip chit^{ch}at and so on. ~~And~~ I never make an effort to find out about it so I am usually the last guy to know. ~~And~~ I think, as far as I know, I first knew about the Rostow change when Walt^y or somebody announced it..

MOSS: Yes.

JOHNSON: I had no idea that it was brewing. Now, why I went there was that I just wasn't altogether comfortable with the role that I was playing there. In some ways^y it was very exciting and we were moving then, just as I was leaving, into a direct relationship with the President which I had never had. I'd been in a few NSC meetings ~~but as far as~~ when he was present^o

MOSS: In what ways?

JOHNSON: Well^y in the sense that I can remember not long before I left^y I wrote a memo under my own signature^y for the President. Now, ~~it was~~ never I was never involved in any discussion of it with him. I can't remember any longer what the memo was about. But before that, everything we had done, everything I had done certainly--I think Bob Komer ^{moved into} ~~worked under~~ this kind of relationship

earlier, in my view ~~everything I had done~~ was done for Rostow or Bundy's signature, ^{bro} I simply acted as a staff man for them and I was one input into a process which ~~was done~~ then had some kind of output that they themselves produced. But we were moving into that kind of relationship. And from that point of view, it promised to be more interesting and exciting.

On the other hand, I found it somewhat uncomfortable to be in a position where I was pushing for one point of view or another, or felt that I should be when I didn't really have the background, I didn't have the time to develop the background that would have made me feel comfortable with whatever it was I was doing. I know I felt that on the Vietnam task force; that I got involved in a lot of specific issues that I didn't really have the background on yet had to take some kind of position or other. And also, there was this business of a tendency to be sort of responding constantly to crises, ^{and a feeling that} you know, you had to have read all of last night's telegrams before you went to the staff meetings or make sure that you were up to date on what was going on in your area and also

The New York Times.

MOSS: Would you push that a little further because a lot of the sort of [David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest] Halberstamy-revisionist kind of stuff that's come out since has been critical of the crisis atmosphere, the government-by-crisis kind of thing. Could you . . .

JOHNSON: Well, I think there was ~~was~~ a tendency to be...
I don't know that it...
[BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I]

MOSS: Okay.

JOHNSON: I don't know that it's altogether distinctive to the Kennedy Administration, ^{but} I think there was a tendency to be pre^ooccupied with what-do-you^o we-^x do-with-what-happened-yesterday kind of thing. ^{about} ~~And~~ I didn't feel particularly wise about what-do-we-do-about-what-happened-yesterday because I wasn't a State Department ^{office} desk, ^{or whatever} or office director, ^{who} was emersed in the daily flow of things. So that kind of thing bothered me. Plus, I didn't feel as comfortable with Bundy as with Rostow. ~~And~~ I left voluntarily. I got the impression that Bundy was rather sorry to have me leave. ~~And~~ I just felt that I would be more comfortable doing something that permitted

me to dig into subjects rather more deeply than the White House NSC business did. I can remember running into ^[Marcus] Mark Raskin, who was strictly a marginal member of the NSC staff as far as I was concerned, anyway, but I do remember his expressing great puzzlement that I was leaving. I mean, why the hell do you want to leave this interesting and exciting place to go over and work for that mushy State Department run by that mushy man, Dean Rusk.

[Laughter]

That was a good question. ~~But it was...~~
~~Another~~ I wasn't certain actually when I made my decision to leave the NSC staff-- which was more precipitated by Walt's leaving than anything else -- what I wanted to do. I didn't have an invitation from Rostow, as I remember, to go over ^{to S/P} ~~there~~ when I left. That happened ~~after~~ ~~when~~ I indicated that I wanted to leave. And I was actually think^{ing} about the possibility, I think, at that point, of leaving the ~~government~~ ~~all together~~, well, not immediately, but by the summer or something. Because I had

always been torn during the whole time I was in the government as to whether I was really an academic or whether I wanted to stay with the bureaucracy indefinitely. I always had the feeling that someday I wanted to return to academia. So that was also in my mind at the time I left, ~~then~~ when I announced that I wanted to leave, ~~and~~ then Walt immediately came in with a suggestion that I come with him over to Policy Planning. ~~and~~ that seemed interesting so I went over there.

MOSS:

Okay, Policy Planning had undergone a lot of changes since it first came in, [George C.] ^{Marsh} [George] Kennan, and so on. What was it that you found over there when you arrived and what kind of stamp did Rostow put on it as you remember?

JOHNSON:

Of course, I don't have any basis for comparing it with the George McGhee period that preceded it, so ~~don't~~ it's a little bit hard for me to say how much of the change had occurred prior to Walt and how much had occurred with his coming there. Let's see, what can I say about that.) [Interruption]

←

JOHNSON: ← ~~Each of us~~, by that time, the Policy Planning Council was relatively large as compared certainly with the old Kennan period. People were more specialized, so I came on basically as the East Asia person. And we had somebody to cover ~~of~~ each area of the world and also some people concerned with various kinds of world-wide functional problems. We worked on the basis of a combination, I think, of self-generated assignments and assignments that either came to us from Walt or from elsewhere in the State Department. I don't know how that compared with the past. I worked by and large on some fairly large issues which accorded with my own interests. It's the kind of thing I've been doing since I left the government, working on very large kinds of questions.

MOSS: What sort of things?

JOHNSON: Well, the first thing I worked on was Asian Regional Cooperation, which was a thing that Walt Rostow was very interested in. ~~and he was~~ I think I got that assignment from him. ~~It~~ ~~was~~ It was a rather frustrating thing. I had worked on that subject once before back in

the mid-fifties because, in the wake of the Geneva settlement, the Eisenhower Administration had gotten interested in regional cooperation in Asia. But the things that you could do were not the sort of grandiose things that I think Walt, in a way, would have liked to have seen, but ~~I think~~ rather small things and unexciting things.

MOSS: ~~you mean~~ Mekong Valley Development Project? ~~Yes?~~

JOHNSON: ~~Yeah, that was . . . I don't know~~ what you could do about, ~~that was~~ again, it ~~was~~ had been going on for a long time . . .

MOSS: ~~Yeah~~ Yes

JOHNSON: . . . and there was some marginal next step that everybody knew about that you could take. So that was not altogether satisfying project. ~~The next thing~~ But I did prepare a paper and I did try to work on some bits of it, that was the way that one had to work on it. ~~And~~ it was an awful lot of effort to produce very little result really.

The next thing I worked on was the political aspects of the Vietnam problem, because that was

~~that was~~ something that had troubled me in our Vietnam policy. I didn't think anybody was really looking at it carefully ~~and~~ I didn't do a particularly sophisticated job, ~~but~~ as I wasn't a Vietnam expert, but I did pull together materials available in the State Department on grievances in Vietnam. Allan Whiting, as I remember, organized a conference about that time of outside experts on Vietnam in which I was involved-- basically a lot of ~~the~~ people ^{that} ~~who~~ had been over there on the Michigan State group who are now mainly academics--to talk about the problems, and so on. I went on to things like the ~~Chinese~~ ^{the} ~~nuclear~~ implications of a Chinese development of a nuclear capability. ~~and~~ then of course I got reinvolved in Vietnam in the study that I did of escalation in late '63-early '64 and then in the Bundy-McNaughton ^{ghton} ~~com~~ committee after the election in '64.

MOSS:

November. How did you see the role of the planning staff vis-à-vis ^{the} operating desks and the policy level of the Under Secretary and the secretary and that sort of thing?

JOHNSON: Well, the big problem was that the Secretary was not that interested in the Policy Planning. ~~mean~~ he made the usual bows in our direction. Everybody has to be in favor of planning; who can be opposed to it, it's a "good thing," you know, ~~quote unquote~~. One of the saddest things that I ever heard on the subject from the Secretary, I thought ~~was~~ ~~and~~ Walt thought it was a great compliment but I thought it was a sad commentary--was, on some issue or other, the Secretary had told Walt that he had not realized the extent to which the Planning Staff had been involved on this issue and the important contribution they had made. Well, I thought that was a hell of a note frankly because this, I believe, is the Secretary's function ~~not just~~ ^{if it's} anybody's function. ~~And~~ he damn well ought to know and ought to be giving some direction to what we ~~are~~ ~~were~~ doing. But he basically was not interested ~~and~~ our relationships therefore tended to be relationships primarily with the Bureaus. Now Walt had other relationships, but the individual members, I think, tended to be

Bureau-oriented, which meant that I was oriented toward the East Asia Bureau.

MOSS: All right.

JOHNSON: ~~And~~ my relationships there tended to be with, there was a regional office that had such planning function as existed, and I usually had a quite good relationship to ^{the head of} that. I had some relationship ~~to the~~ with the Assistant Secretary, it varied over time. I didn't have a hell of a lot with [Averell W.] Harriman or Roger Hilsman. I was involved with Bundy more because of the Vietnam business, but that was a more personal kind of thing in a way.

~~The~~ But I did work with the Deputy Assistant Secretary^{ies}, office directors, and so on. ¶ Sometimes they generated assignments or suggested things that we ought to do. ~~But~~ more often than not, those damned assignments were lousy ones because what they were trying to do was to get some problem off their backs by getting ~~sp~~ to look into it and then say that, well, somebody else is doing it. Like ~~if~~ somebody got concerned about should we really be concerned

about [Achmed] Sukarno's claims that he was going to have a nuclear capability--a ridiculous issue as far as I was concerned. I didn't want anything to do with it. But they wanted it knocked down, so I spent a little time knocking it down.

MOSS: ^{That a}
A one word answer won't do.

JOHNSON: One word, you've got to do a paper.

MOSS: Let me ask you this about FE, ~~Far East~~ I get the impression in comparing the material on the Far East that we have with that on the Congo crisis that the desk officers and the office level people are not as obvious in the paperwork that at least got to the White House. You don't see . . .

JOHNSON: In the FE material?

MOSS: . . . in FE a [G. McMurtrie] Mack Godley, for instance, really handling the local show in town. I get much more of a feel of ~~W. Averell~~ Harriman and ~~Roger~~ Hilsman running the thing. Is that fair or do you have a different view?

JOHNSON: I think that's probably true for the Harriman Hilsman period. I'm not really all that expert on it. I found that relationships with the FE bureau were a lot easier than I had an exper-

ience in dealing for a year with the Near East-South Asia bureau and it was partly that I was more of an outsider there, but I found that a much more difficult bureau to deal with^g as a department policy planner^g than FE. They held things close to the chest, they weren't willing to let you find out what was going on, they basically wanted you to get out of the way, and so on. I filled in when Howard Riggins was on a year's leave. He had a year's leave and then I had a year's leave. ~~And I dealt with~~ I and [David] Dave Leinbach dealt with some South Asia problems. People like Carol ^{Laise} ~~Lace~~ who I liked fine, got along with her okay but I always had the feeling that you know we're just trouble and not worth it. Whereas in the FE bureau I had much more a feeling that they viewed us as genuinely helpful, were interested in what we were doing, and so on.

MOSS: Do you have any . . .

JOHNSON: I know Roger Hilsman has some very critical things to say about policy planning in his book.

MOSS: Do you have any feel⁼ for the ambassad⁼ors in the field in the FE area; ^{for} [Winthrop ^{G.] Win} Brown and

[Frederick E., Jr.] Nolting and [Kenneth T.] Ken Young and people like that? Alan Kirk.

JOHNSON: The only one of those I really knew at all is Ken Young. I knew him somewhat. I think he had a kind of interest in planning, sort of. He liked to get into the large picture from time to time. But I never really had any real involvement with him either at that time. I had some subsequently.

MOSS: ~~[Alfred S.]~~ Kirk and [Edwin O.] Reischauer, [William E.] Stevenson and . . .

JOHNSON: No, not really.

MOSS: What's the fellow ^{in Indonesia} ~~named~~ who just died recently?

JOHNSON: Howard Jones?

MOSS: Jones.

JOHNSON: No, I didn't go out and do the kind of touring business. In retrospect I wish I had done that. Somebody like [William R.] Bill Polk, for example, got out about every six months to the Near East. I should have done that. I stayed much too much, I think, in Washington. If I had gone out I would have had more of this kind of relationship.

I was involved to a degree with Reischauer because I arranged to set up a--but that was in

~~the Lyndon B.~~ ^{g the} Johnson administration--planning operation that continues with the Japanese when I went out to Japan the first time that we ~~headed~~ ^{had it} out there.

MOSS: Let me ask you a little bit about the relationship of the other members of the policy planning staff with the White House. I've been reading recently [Richard E.] Neustadt's Skybolt report. Henry Owen seems to be undercutting everybody else at State with a special kind of relationship on nuclear NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] matters and so on with the White House. Do you see much of this?

JOHNSON: I don't think there was a lot of that. I think Henry was probably in some significant degree a special case. He'd been brought over there briefly in the NSC (~~National Security Council~~) staff. I have the feeling that he was actually offered a job over there and turned it down. I'm not sure about that. So that he perhaps had more of a relationship. And of course he and Walt were keen on the MLF [Multilateral Force] business and Walt had direct relationships with the White House. Now my only relationship to the White House was ^{of} a

more casual, informal sort. I occasionally had lunch with [Michael Y.] Mike Forrestal. And then when [James C., Jr.] Jim Thompson was over there during the Vietnam escalation struggle, I was then informally feeding some stuff to him; sometimes with, I think often with [William P.] Bill Bundy's knowledge, if I remember everything right. But I don't think that was typical. I think that somebody like Howard Riggins probably had some. . . . Well, Howard Riggins and Bill Polk I know had some relationship to their opposite numbers in the White House; to ~~Robert~~ ^{W.D.} Bob Komer basically, I guess, for both of them.

The planning staff was a very individualized kind of operation. Each of us operated in quite different ways, or at least partially different ways, so that it's very hard to generalize. Some people were interested in doing sort of very philosophical, general sorts of things, other people were interested in dealing ^{only} with very specific, concrete, current problems, and others of us, and I would put myself in that category, were someplace in between, interested in large

issues, somewhat longer term issues, but also things that did link to the present like the Chinese nuclear thing, or I worked later on the Indonesian economic problems, politico-economic problems. So that it is harder to generalize. Obviously, those that were interested mainly in the philosophic approach had no particular reason to have an involvement with the White House, whereas those ^{who} ~~that~~ were involved in day-to-day issues might be more inclined to. We did have, of course, this planning group that met informally once a week that involved White House participation: Bob Komer, Mac Bundy, various people came over for that, and that was a way to get our ideas into the White House ~~chain~~ stream.

MOSS: How receptive did you feel they were to this kind of thing?

JOHNSON: I don't know how interested they were. It's hard to say. It's like the planning business generally: it's very hard to know whether you have any influence and if so, of what character.

MOSS: ~~Were~~ were they frequent attenders or was it a sometime . . .

JOHNSON: I think they generally came. That's my impres-

sion. As a member of ~~S/P~~ ~~(S/P - Planning and~~
~~Coordination Staff)~~
I went only when something that was related to
my interests was on the agenda.

MOSS: As a member of S/P, did you get involved at all
in the reassessment of things after the May
Buddhist demonstrations in Vietnam or was there
any S/P role?

JOHNSON: You mean /what do we do about the [Ngo Dinh] Diem
regime.
in the question of

MOSS: Right.

JOHNSON: No, not really.

MOSS: Okay. Let me turn this off for a minute and
have a look at those memoranda. ~~(Interruption)~~
[Interruption]

MOSS: Okay. You were just saying that one of the things
that the White House was pushing . . .

JOHNSON: My recollection is that in connection with my
involvement particularly on the [Sterling J. ~~Jesse~~] Cottrell
Vietnam task force that one of the themes that we
pushed fairly hard was that this was a Vietnamese
war, that we could help but that ultimately it
was up to the Vietnamese to win it.

MOSS: Now this of course is mentioned specifically by
Kennedy in that [Walter] Cronkite interview in
September 2, I think it was, 1963. But it was

as early as April, May, June of '61 that this was happening?

JOHNSON: That is my recollection, yeah. Now what the significance of that is I think is still subject to interpretation.

MOSS: Yes, of course. Talking about the question of [Edward G.] Lansdale . . .

JOHNSON: I don't have any very specific recollection of this but my general recollection is that when the question of using Lansdale in some connection in Vietnam came up, ^{that} there was a certain lack of enthusiasm on the part of the State Department. I can't remember anything beyond that, I don't remember why: whether it was the past CIA ~~Central Intelligence Agency~~ connection or whatever it was but. . .

MOSS: Okay. Well, there are two things that I have, very vaguely. ^{Well} One is specifically: at the end of an early meeting on Vietnam ⁱⁿ ~~at~~ which Ken Young had presented a paper and I think they had looked at a Lansdale paper, Kennedy is reported by ~~the~~ Bromley Smith's minutes as saying, "Well, who should be ambassador to Vietnam, Young or Lansdale?" And of course, neither one of them. It was

~~Frederick E., Jr.~~ Nolting, Mirabile dictus, who wound up there. And then there's some question as to his role on the ~~Roswell L.~~ Gilpatric task force, which was a sort of executive director kind of thing. And then he faded out of the picture when the ⁺Cotrell task force was set up to do the day-to-day, week-to-week monitoring and act as the desk really for Vietnam.

JOHNSON: I simply don't know enough about the background of that to say anything useful. I think.

MOSS: Okay, fine. Let me just put on the record that the first things we're going to be talking about are the two memoranda of the twenty-eighth of April '61: the Komer memorandum and yours on the program of action for Vietnam. Right?

JOHNSON: Right.

MOSS: Okay.

JOHNSON: You raised the question at the beginning on ~~Monday~~ a Komer memo. . . Pardon me, maybe we should stop it now. [Interruption] You

JOHNSON: ← raised the question about whether there was sufficient attention to the how-to-do-it aspect of Vietnam programs. I do think there was a tendency here as in so many government policies

to proceed from rather broad generalities to very concrete specific action without really filling in the intermediate levels of analysis. I think that's a very characteristic kind of thing. I think as I recall it, rather vaguely, you had this Gilpatric task force with all ^{of} its fairly general recommendations, as I remember, and then you had the Cotrell ⁺ task force set up to implement it. The Cotrell ⁺ task force immediately became involved, as I think my memos indicate, in a whole series of quite specific issues that were not then very ^{adequately} ~~much~~ ^{back} related/to the broader program of what it was that we were trying to do. I don't think this is unique to the Vietnam case. I think it's rather a common tendency in ^{American} foreign policy making, as others have suggested. Let's stop it.

MOSS: All right. [Interruption]

JOHNSON: You ask ^{about} the relevance of the Korean model, since there is some passing reference to it in Bob Komer's memo. My impression was that the Kennedy administration came in very much with the idea that Vietnam was a different kind of

war. In fact, they were implicitly and explicitly critical of the ~~(Dwight D.)~~ Eisenhower administration ^{for} viewing it as being much like the Korean kind of war and having geared up a typical military assistance program to deal with that kind of war and so on. Much was made of the fact that the president had read Mao Tse-tung on guerilla warfare and he knew that this was a different kind of war. Now, whether we acted on that basis I think is something else again, but there was at least an explicit awareness that this was a different kind of a war. You had various people giving talks like ~~(Walt Rostow)~~ Rostow and so on on the special character of guerilla warfare.

MOSS:

All right. But you also get a more traditional, almost [Dean G. Acheson] Achesonian reference to the Korean war: Well, we showed them that they couldn't do it in Korea, therefore we have to show them that they cannot do it in Vietnam kind of thing.

JOHNSON:

In that sense, yes, I think that there continued to be this kind of argument about US credibility and the need to stand firm in Vietnam in order to avoid trouble elsewhere in the world; that kind of

generalized argument in that sense, yes ^o but not in the sense of the wars ^{as} being the same in their basic character--even though, as I say, we may have acted in ways that suggested we didn't really understand the difference fully.

One other point ^{that is} suggested by your comment relates to another question you've raised here and that is the relationship between Laos and Vietnam. My impression, and so many of these things are impressions at this point rather than specific recollections, is that our tendency was to think that we'll settle for a soft settlement in Laos because that's a hopeless place. We've tried to fiddle around with the politics and the military situation in there all during the fifties and we ~~we~~ ~~got~~ no place. But Vietnam is a, I think Rostow would probably put it, much sturdier kind of place. This is the place we can take a stand. In this sense there was a kind of tie between these and I think it comes through here and there in some of these memos. ^{MOSS: It does. JOHNSON:} I think it was, in retrospect, a rather dangerous sort of notion. There's some plausibil-

ity to the idea ^{that} comparatively Vietnam looked better than Laos. But obviously ^{that} tended to overlook the very real problems that you had in Vietnam.

Now you've raised the question of the selection of Cot⁺rell to head the Vietnam task force and the relationship between that and the idea that Rusk had abdicated to [Robert S.] McNamara in the running of the war. I think these two things are not inconsistent because Cot⁺rell was precisely the kind of guy who could get along with the military and ^{who} was very likely selected in part for that reason. He had come to the job either directly or with perhaps some other assignment in between from being political adviser to CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific].

MOSS: Oh, okay.

JOHNSON: And so he had been associated with the military and ^{it's} my impression that he had other association elsewhere in his career. In any event, I think he was basically their kind of guy, so that. . . .

MOSS: Because later on there's a paper that he gins up on Laos

JOHNSON: Laos thing, ~~years~~ ^{years} ago.

MOSS: . . . ^{yes}~~yeah~~ that is a very strong militaristic kind of thing.

JOHNSON: Well, that's another thing I would say about Cot is that he was oriented strongly toward military solutions, even though he's a State Department type. For what reason, I can't tell you. Maybe it's partly related to the fact that he had been around the military. He was very much of an activist and that was another reason I think he was selected. They wanted a foreign service officer who was an activist and for some people that's a contradiction ⁱⁿ~~of~~ terms.

MOSS: All right. Now, who selected him?

JOHNSON: ~~That~~ That I can't tell you . . .

MOSS: Okay.

JOHNSON: . . . because I, you see, that's about the time I got injected into this thing and it ^{had}~~is~~ already happened so I don't know. I suspect he was nominated by the State Department but who over there picked him out, I don't know.

MOSS: Yeah, okay.

JOHNSON: He did operate to some degree, with some kind of loose supervision I think from ^[U. Alexis] Alex Johnson. Whether they have some past connection I don't know. But there was something in here that re-

minded me of that and I believe that was the case.

You know, the question of Rusk and McNamara's role in the war: one's feeling about Rusk in general on this as on a number of other issues is that it wasn't so much maybe that he surrendered responsibility to McNamara because he thought it was a military operation as that he just didn't maybe have any strong views or didn't want to become involved ⁹ in other words, that there was no conscious surrendering so much as that he didn't engage himself in fighting for some State Department views. Now part of it was that Cotrell⁺ was running things and he got along with the military. The State Department however did have views on some things. For example, at the later stage the State Department as I remember it resisted efforts by the Pentagon to relax the rules with respect to bombing inside South Vietnam, this covert bombing operation that we had going there. I forget when that finally did get changed but there was real State Department resistance. But I don't know whether. . . . One had the feeling, but I'm not an accurate reporter necessarily on this, that Rusk, it wasn't so much that he expli-

citly resigned responsibility as that he just didn't positively engage himself in this particular thing. But I don't know, that's to some fair extent speculative. But it is clear the nature of Cotrell and how he fit I think in this picture. We might stop.

MOSS: ^{Yes.}
~~Yeah~~ [Interruption]

JOHNSON: You raise the question of whether we perceived at all in 1961 the fact that the communists were more influenced by the fact that they believed that we couldn't possibly win, that the non-communist side couldn't possibly win ^{than} and they were by possible threatening military actions and so on that the U.S. might take. I don't think that we perceived this, it isn't my sense that we perceived this, that they clearly felt that they were going to win, whatever happened, at this time. I think my perception was that this kind of thing tended to be emphasized in analysis by those who were opponents of escalation in 1964 but that it wasn't very much a part of the dialogue up till then; that that was very much a part of the case that was made against escalation, that the communists were confident that they were going to win, with

good reason. Okay. [Interruption]

JOHNSON:

← You raise ~~the~~^{the} question about the handwritten note, I think it's on a Komer memo and the note I think is by Rostow: "Viet Minh versus border issue, pinpricks versus long-range principle" and the comment about the desperation of the situation. I think Rostow tended to be an alarmist on Vietnam from the beginning, I think that's evident in a number of these memos. He also from the very beginning, as this comment suggests, was trying to raise the issue of the north's aggression against the south, as ~~we~~^{he} would put it, and to make this a matter of principle. He made this famous speech, I think it was at Fort Bragg, which got published in some anthologies on guerrilla warfare and so on, in which is allegedly, allegedly had Kennedy's advance review and so on, which raised that as an issue. I think he was just, this is just one of many, many reflections of the fact that he had that in mind, and what he was raising here was, shouldn't we really raise the long run principle, the basic principle of whether infiltration across international boundaries, as he viewed it and as we all tended to

view it at that time, didn't constitute aggression as much as the military attack of, say, North Korea against South Korea.

MOSS: That is a very sympathetic position to take at that time, in the context of those . . .

JOHNSON: ^{Yes.} ~~Yeah~~ You see, and there was a certain amount of support for this in the sense that Walt wanted to do it partly, as these memos make clear, because he wanted to lay the base for possible future attack on North Vietnam. Other people, however, were interested in doing it in order to justify what we were already embarked on under the Kennedy administration program ^{violations} of the Geneva accords, in a number of different respects. That's a part of Walt's rationale too but I think it was basically for that reason that that first white paper got issued, the [William R.] Jorda ^{exercise}

MOSS: Yeah. ~~(Interruption)~~

[BEGIN TAPE II SIDE I]

JOHNSON: One of the things that. . . . This is such a chancey ^{commentary} commentary . . .

MOSS: Yes, it is. It is understood.

JOHNSON: . . . And all one can do to give the sense of the time retrospectively ^{I mean, and it} ~~that~~ is thirteen years ago.

and my involvement, anyone's involvement in this kind of thing was in and out and therefore very fragmentary.

MOSS: All right. Would you comment on the in and out character of participation and how that may have affected interests and commitments and judgment and that kind of thing.

JOHNSON: ^{Yes} Yeah I don't know ^{that} ~~whether~~ there's really anything terribly interesting I can say on that in the context of this early period. It was certainly true later when I was involved in the escalation exercise where I was in and out. That was a very serious limitation on one's ability to be relevant and useful and to have any impact. And it was very confusing; you never knew where the hell the ball was. But that's rather typical of government operations, not particularly unusual, except that that was highly classified and therefore there was a tendency to close the group for security reasons. But I don't know that there is anything particularly useful to say about this period.

A question about sealing the borders and how could we really take this seriously.

MOSS: There's a ^a later reference in another memorandum to a ~~quote~~ "glass wall" ~~unquote~~

JOHNSON: ^{Yes.} ~~Yeah~~ That was an idea ~~bombing~~ ^{bounding} around for a long, long time. It grew ^w out of this concern, of course, with the real fact that there was an infiltration problem from North Vietnam and more immediately from Cambodia. ^{At least} it was very debat able at that time whether there was one from Cambodia. I think everybody was aware, most people were aware of the real limitations of any kind of effort to, ~~quote~~ "seal the borders," ~~close quote~~ that that was much too simple a way to put it. I think the reason that people kept coming back to this despite its difficulties and its improbabilities was that they were looking for some answer to this problem short of bombing North Vietnam. I know that in 1964 when some of us were opposing the bombing, we were also again looking at this kind of possibility as a way to head off the bombing thing which we thought was a horrendous outcome and ^{at least} this/would keep the war within the south, you see. And I suspect that similar kinds of things operated then. And of course when McNamara actually did something

substantial about it then, as I recall ~~it~~ it was during the days when we were trying to do everything that we could think of that possibly would do any good; in effect, implementing a strategy that Komer called for back here in '61, you know, throw in the works, whatever the cost. Okay, let's stop it. [Interruption]

JOHNSON:

← You raise a very good question about what happens to these memoranda that Komer and I wrote, say on the Gilpatric report, ^{and} more generally, what happens to these various memoranda that we and others prepared. I think in general one could say that not a hell of a lot happens with respect to many of them. Part of it is a constant briefing process and searching for opportunities to influence. Often the situation is not one where there is any possibility of influence or where the guy you're briefing is not in a position to raise the questions in ^{any} meaningful way or whatever, ^{it} and still you do ^{it} ~~think~~ Walt Rostow himself was a tremendous practitioner of this kind of art. I think you can overdo it and I think Walt did often, in the sense that he just fired off memos here, there, and everywhere. That's

one reason he's taken more responsibility than he should have in the public eye, I think, for the escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1964. In my view he had very little to do with that. But he was unquestionably sending memos and these got scooped up when they did the Pentagon papers.

Now specifically with respect to my proposals on political change in South Vietnam, one of the problems here was I think that there was a resistance, and it was a well known resistance on the part of Diem, to doing anything in the way of political reform. We had just made a switch in policy in a sense--and I think ^{this} is an important point for understanding several of these controversies--~~switch in policy~~ at the beginning of the Kennedy administration after thinking, I think, about the possibility of going for some other leader or whatever; although I'm not sure about that. There was a decision made that we'll get along with Diem. There'd been the effort at the end of the Eisenhower administration to get Diem to get rid of brother [Ngo Dinh] Nhu.

[Elbridge] DUBROW, the ambassador, had been the spearpoint on that and as a result

he'd become persona non grata in Saigon and the diplomatic relationship had deteriorated severely. So the idea here, ~~was~~ I think, was not really sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem but it was, let's try Diem and see if we can't work with him and then we'll reconsider. And that's why there are elements in some of these memos that suggest that that's on people's minds still. Can we make it with Diem? But the tendency was to say we've got to get along with Diem. So there was little inclination to fight very hard on political reform, I think, where we'd been through this exercise in the late fifties.

An example of this from a later time, when I was in the State Department on the policy one of planning council, I indicated/the first things I did was a study on political grievances in South Vietnam. One of the recommendations I came up with, ^{it} was not a new idea, most recommendations aren't, but it was an idea to have a Viet Cong interrogation program as a way of getting at why people join/the Viet Cong, what their motivations were, how were they hurting, how were the Viet Cong exploiting grievances, and so on. My

model was Lucian Pye's study of insurgency in Malaya. Well, when that question was raised, the response was, Nolting is not about to spend any of his political capital with Diem in order to get that kind of a study laid on and we know damn well, because the question has been suggested in the past ~~that~~ ^{and} Diem won't go for it unless we're prepared to put a hell of a lot of pressure on him. Because it involves putting Americans ~~in~~ ^{into} if it's going to be done effectively--~~putting~~ ~~Americans into~~ Vietnam, having them ask questions that are very politically sensitive, and finding out things that Diem would rather not have outsiders find out about. ~~And~~ I think that's why, that's one reason, anyway, why nothing much happened. Another thing is we really didn't have a very clear idea, I don't think we had any clear idea right up till the very end as to what the real nature of the political problem was in Vietnam. There's a tendency on the one side, and that's reflected in one of my memos here, on the part of journalists and so on--I think of [Robert Shaplen], for example, a New York ^{er} correspondent, ~~who~~ ^{to} think of it in terms of western

democratic forms. And that's what we finally went for under Lyndon Johnson. It couldn't have been less relevant in my view. But if that wasn't relevant then the question was } what was. One of the troubles was we didn't know enough about what was going on in the Viet Cong movement. We didn't have the kind of analysis that Jeffery Race has now made in this book on the war, which I think is the best thing that I know of on the nature of the appeals and so on.

So nothing happens to this kind of stuff. I mean, my study on Viet Cong grievances, or grievances in the countryside, as I recall it, got sent out to Saigon. I got a reaction back from the desk officer, Ben Wood, saying they thought it was great, they liked it, it was good stuff, you know. [Laughter] But that's about it, you know.

MOSS: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Okay. That I think pretty well covers that.

JOHNSON: [interruption] I think this is not a particularly informed comment but it strikes me that Komer's memos here are kind of tactical in character, which is a familiar kind of memo if you're in the

bureaucracy. It isn't so much that he's endorsing getting a military presence in Vietnam--well, that's the way it sounds--as he is saying that if we do get one in ~~in~~ At one point he says explicitly, I don't know whether it's a good idea. This is the way to do it, and that's the way I read these memos. Really you ought to ask Bob about that.

Now on the business of why certain memos are addressed to Bundy and certain memos were addressed to Rostow, I think that was--it would be hard to recall in retrospect and I suspect it's just accidental or had to do with some kind of tactical situation at that time.

MOSS: Or who was in town?

JOHNSON: Both of them were our bosses. Rostow might be out of town for the day or you know, there's no particular reason for that. You could ask Komer about why he did it. Let's see, I don't think this is very helpful really, these comments.

[Interruption]

MOSS: You can always take them off ^{the record} later.

JOHNSON: We can always take them off, right. This business of the paragraph 1 of Rostow's memo of the ~~center~~ 10th

of May being uncannily prophetic, ^{it's} predicting a military coup and the questions this might raise, I think, ^{as} some other evidence in these memos indicates, we were constantly getting reports of coup planning all during this period and there presumably was coup planning, in fact, of various degrees of seriousness going on that CIA was aware of. That's rather typical of this kind of a situation, I think. And in that sense it is not particularly prophetic.

MOSS: Well, let me ask you this too while we are on the subject. How much reliance did people place on the CIA reports, the TDCS series for instance? They seemed to be a real mixed bag as far as value is concerned.

JOHNSON: Oh they are a very mixed bag, I think, ~~and~~ and of course it depends on the reliability of the source and all that sort of thing, which is indicated in a general way on the report itself, but if wanted to really find out you would have to go back and ask CIA.

It's very hard to say in general the reliance they place upon this kind of report. Of course top policy makers seldom see these detailed agent reports and so on. And of course, sometimes when they find one that confirms their presuppositions

why they are likely to believe that and not others. I think if you are following things fairly closely and are reading these as among the things that you read you are more likely to be impressed, obviously, if you seem to get a pattern of them ~~which~~ ^{If} there are a number of them that are from different sources and different angles ^{that} are saying somewhat the same thing, then you get somewhat concerned or you get interested in, or if some part of the thing is subsequently confirmed by something that happened. But, of course, you have other ways of getting intelligence, finished intelligence or quasi-finished intelligence, as you know. ^{But} There are checks on this kind of thing and they give you some kind of evaluation by an expert.

I think you raised some question about whether Rostow's final comment to the effect that ^{approving} ~~accomplish~~ that this looks okay with these qualifications, tended to undermine other qualifications, I don't know the exact nature of this memo, what it was intended for, but it sounds as though it was intended as a kind of briefing memo for the president to raise questions ^{and} that ^{is} just sort of ^{or} other things equal statement at the end saying okay these are the questions I have had and the rest of it, as far as

I am concerned, looks okay. So I don't attach any particular significance to that.

You raised some questions about the Vietnam task force, who attended and so on. The task force was basically a bureaucratic kind of operation with a bureaucratic kind of representation. Cottrell I guess was about as high-level as anybody. He was an FSO-1 I believe. There was a rear admiral or vice admiral . . .

MOSS: Luther Heinz.

JOHNSON: Heinz was the deputy head of the military assistance program, the Far East part of it.

MOSS: He was ISA/FE.

JOHNSON: That's what it was. And the conversation was bureaucratic. It's not that the conversation was very memorable, I am afraid, and that therefore one has nice stories to tell about. A very bureaucratic kind of operation which related most of the time to fairly detailed issues of who does what tomorrow or next week or whatever. It served a purpose, typical I think of this kind of operation, of providing some measure of coordination, although not all the coordination took place in the meetings, some measure of communication among everybody involved so that everybody knew what was going on

more or less on Vietnam, so that USIA, for example, would be a part and what not. So far as my designation to represent the White House NSC staff on this, my recollection is that Walt simply told me to go to the first meeting. Maybe I asked him another time or two but I just learned that I was to be the representative. I was the appropriate representative because he would have been much the highest level person there, I think, if he had gone.

My own role in this was a rather delicate one, at least I felt it so, maybe it was that I had been oversocialized by my prior experience on the NSC staff. But if you are at all sensitive to the problems it is very hard to represent the president or the White House in a body like this because you don't know what the hell the president or the White House's view is on new issues and particularly issues that involve detailed questions that they have not addressed and may never address. So that a large part of my role, as I think these memos indicate, was simply, as we used to say in the bureaucracy, keeping a watching brief, that is going, listening, occasionally making a comment,

tending to become involved more procedurally than substantively in reporting. Then if I had any questions that I wanted to get substantive advice on, raising those sort of retrospectively and then going back outside the meeting, or going back in the next meeting or something like that. I don't think that the way I played it was the way that everybody played it in task forces. Bob Komer and ^[Kenneth] Ken Hansen were on a task force on Iran, if I remember correctly, at that time and my impressions ⁹ from the staff meetings was ^{that} they played a pretty activist role. Now that was a different kind of task force. There were all sorts of task forces and that was more a policy-oriented task force. Ours was much more operational, administrative task force. So that made some of the difference too. ¶ So far as representative is concerned, ^{that} I am sure ~~that~~ can be obtained from the record, but my recollection is that various people from the State Department, various offices in State that had an interest were represented there; Defense; JCS; ^[Joint Chiefs of Staff] CIA, that is the covert side of CIA, not intelligence side, as far as I can remember.

MOSS:

Yes. So it wouldn't have been ^[Desmond A.] Des Fitzgerald who was . . .

JOHNSON: Yes, Des came to some of those, but then he had McGill representing him. I've forgotten his name but I knew his brother later. But I remember Des was in and out of ^a that thing. ^[Agency for International Development] AID, I think, ^[Maxwell] was represented; White House NSC. After [^] Taylor was designated special assistant of whatever he was to the president, ~~was~~ special representative

MOSS: Special military representative.

JOHNSON: ~~special~~ military representative to the president some young commander from his staff also went to those meetings. We went together typically during that time. In fact one of these records of meetings that doesn't have my name on it I think was probably prepared by that guy.

MOSS: Oh, do you remember his name?

JOHNSON: Oh hell. I'd recognise . . .

MOSS: The only guy I remember is ^[Lawrence] Larry Legère, but. . . .

JOHNSON: Well, Larry|Legere, no it wasn't Larry. It was a more junior guy. Larry was a lieutenant colonel^o or colonel^o. There was another guy who was a colonel or a brigadier general^o but this young guy, quite bright subsequently went over with Taylor when Taylor went to the Pentagon and then he commanded a destroyer or something, that was the last I

knew about him. I can't remember
MOSS: [Worth C.]
^ Bagley?
JOHNSON: Bagley, that's it. John . . .
MOSS: Worth Bagley.
JOHNSON: Worth Bagley, Worth Bagley, that's the guy.
MOSS: I was trying to pull it out of my memory there.
I knew I had seen the name somewhere.

JOHNSON: That's amazing, I hadn't thought of that but
that's the guy, ^{no question about it} Let's see.

Now, on the question of why the concept
of a task force and why it was necessary to set
up a ^{parallel} task force in Saigon when there
was already a mission out there. It was just
that the Kennedy administration set up task
forces, it was a ^{new} ~~new~~ device.

MOSS: That's what I thought.

JOHNSON: I think part of the idea here was to provide
some flexibility and ^{it did} ~~to do~~ that in virtue by a
degree in getting things out of the normal
bureaucratic channels, that is ^{to} ~~to~~ have, to
designate specifically people ^{to} ~~who would~~ ^{to} represent
an agency. That meant that the question at least
was raised and it didn't get settled automatically
because somebody was on some desk or other. Now ^

in fact of course, the reality is that the people ^{that} ~~who~~ normally handled it tended to be the people designated. But I think that was the main reason. I can't remember, if I ever knew, why a task force was set up in Saigon. I suspect though that it was partly cosmetic, but it was partly perhaps to get the embassy focused on the set of issues with which we were concerned and to think of themselves as a task force that had a relationship to a task force in Washington.

But somebody like Nolting's deputy . . .

MOSS: ^[William C.] Truehart.

JOHNSON: Truehart, Bill Truehart.

MOSS: Oh, one set of names you can straighten me out on too: John Mecklin and a fellow named ^{[John] Meckling} ~~McCleary~~ Do you remember.

JOHNSON: ^[Public Finance Officer] Meckling was the PAO in Saigon and ^[John] ~~McCleary~~ was the guy, my recollect is that he was in Alex Johnson's staff or GPM on State Department.

MOSS: That sounds right.

JOHNSON: I never knew him well, but I can remember the name.

MOSS: Both of them pop in and out of the Vietnam thing all the time.

JOHNSON: Although Meckling^h wasn't that involved.

MOSS: He appears in the August-Septemebr-October '63 thing every now and then.

JOHNSON: Oh, does he. ^{Well} ~~Was~~ that's possible, see I wasn't involved in that myself.

MOSS: Right.

JOHNSON: The next question I have a comment on: What did it mean in^hpractice that the task force would be running the Vietnam desk? Well, Cottrell in effect became a very high-level desk officer. Ben Wood who had been on the desk then became his deputy. And the task force in effect be^hcame from this point of view a mechanism for coordinating some of the action, some of the information that would ordinarily be handled by the desk, but it gave it a kind of special status presumably. By bringing in a high-level person it did elevate the State Department leadership over what it would be if you just had an ordinary desk officer running things. In general, ~~a task force operation~~, the only thing that I can remember of a basic policy sort that was raised with the task force it^self was this Cott^Trell plan for cleaning ^{out} ~~up~~ of the panhandle in Laos that is mentioned in here that

we'll be getting to I think later.

MOSS: Yes.

JOHNSON: You have a sort of aside question on declassification and whether agencies have the authority to declassify material in NSC papers. As far as I know that authority continued, however it did not relate to the whole NSC paper, but rather to the point that the State Department in implementing a paragraph relating to diplomacy had perfect authority to decide how to handle that particular issue from the point of view of ~~de~~ classification. Obviously some things become public because they involve public actions, but the authority to declassify, downgrade classification of NSC papers, I don't know where that rests. I know that when I was on the NSC staff way back in the fifties people were raising that question of what was going to happen when all ~~of~~ this became history, who was going to handle this horrendous problem of deciding on classification.

MOSS: I'm right there now. Believe me it's a mare's nest.

JOHNSON: ^{Eb}~~ed~~ Gleason, who was the deputy executive secretary of the NSC, subsequently went over to be deputy head of the historical office. I think probably he

got involved when he went over there.

MOSS: We get things going both ways now. You know we'll send them to NSC and they'll say, "No, no, this has to be reviewed by ISA and JCS⁹ and [U.S. Information Agency]"⁹ and this and that. Or we will send them out to the agencies we think are concerned and they'll say, "No, this concerns national security policy, we have got to send it up to the NSC."

JOHNSON: Well, that's the way ^{it would have} we've been handled before too I'm sure, because our tendency was to say we take responsibility for nothing ⁱⁿ and this ~~is reflective of that~~ respect^o.

MOSS: I think one of the problems is that when they came out with the new executive order the implementation is lodged in the NSC.

JOHNSON: I see. No, I didn't make any notes because I began to run out of time so ^{we'll just have to} let's wing it on this.

[INTERRUPTION] →

JOHNSON: You asked why Walt Rostow in a particular memo of the 26th of May 1961 thought the situation in Vietnam was critical. I think basically Walt tended to believe that the situation out there was always critical, from then and almost

at all subsequent times. Furthermore Walt was, I think, always looking for targets of opportunity that is, if there were something in the news, the news in the broad sense of intelligence reports or telegrams as well as the newspapers, that he could use to make his point, why he would take off from that and use that as a way to get people agitated and interested. Which is a device that we all use to some degree in the bureaucracy, but I think Walt perfected it to a degree that few other people have. I don't have any other comments here on this.

MOSS: I think you've already covered the Korean draft agreement then ~~evaders~~ earlier.

JOHNSON: That's right. Oh, the 2nd of June 1961, I don't have any specific recollection of this at all but I suspect that the question of what do we do about making public statements had somehow gotten up to the president and he ^{had} decided it, ^{while} meanwhile it was being turned around in the bureaucracy. That's not an unusual thing to have happen.

MOSS: Okay.

JOHNSON: ~~I guess there are~~ "R" in the corner memo ~~You were wondering if~~
Rostow had seen the memo he must have seen most

of these. He was pretty good about reading memos
If you sent him one you could assume that he ^{had} read
it. Sometimes that doesn't appear on
^{but that it isn't significant} it. A tremendous capacity to work in the guy, to
read, God. Well, again, this business of inflated
figures, we relied on Vietnam GBN information all
the time because we simply lacked any alternative.
Until we became heavily involved and we were
able to collect our own information. That was ^{of} the
problem constantly on Vietnam, the fact that you
relied on Vietnamese information and the Vietnamese
reporting system was one ^{that} ~~which~~ did not necessarily
encourage the production. . . . I mean it was a
well-known fact that it was an authoritarian
system and it worked on the principle of the
bearers of bad tidings suffer for bringing them.
Therefore you don't report bad tidings. Plus the
fact that they were trying to influence us. So
that's a very common kind of problem, ^{you know} ~~it was an~~
unsatisfactory character of information. ~~I mean~~
in a way it's a kind of a dangerous atmosphere to
operate in because people were generally aware
of this and they knew it. The specialists on

any particular bit of information always knew that with respect^e to their information what the sources were.

MOSS: Yes.

JOHNSON: The trouble was that one was always getting a lot of information^s and one would forget that this wasn't necessar^sily the gospel truth or even any place close to it. There might be damned good reasons why it was asserted. That's one of the horrendous problems of the Vietnam thing^s when^s we got so heavily involved and dependent on them and not really knowing. Of course we didn't do all that much better once we got out there, although Bob Komer ~~was~~ would probably tell^e you that^s after he got his computers operating....

Commenting on the question of why the members of the Cottrell task force seemed to go along with his proposals for some kind of military action in Laos as a way of dealing with that problem, I can only speculate but it's based on a feeling I've had for some time in observing the experts on Southeast Asia and that is a feeling that we would not have been saved from our errors in Vietnam by the experts necessarily. There were some experts, to be sure, that were opposed to some of the things that we did at particular

times, but it is also true, I think, that the experts tended to identify, here as elsewhere in the world, with the country that they were concerned with. They tended to know Vietnamese, many of them had served in Vietnam, it was their job to make this program succeed and so on. ^Then there was the additional fact that there was still a hangover of a lot of cold war thinking in the bureaucracy and one might say in the administration. So that when somebody comes in with a proposal of doing something of a military sort in Laos and presents it to a bunch of bureaucratic experts, it's not too surprising, I think, that they go along with it or ^{at least} ~~just~~ don't raise serious objection to it. Another factor, of course, that may be operating here was that they were bureaucrats and they realized that that kind of issue wasn't going to be one that they were going to settle in that kind of a group.

504102011: One part of Cottrell's proposal was that we sort of give up on the Geneva Conference on Laos, and I think there was a certain amount of sympathy for that kind of hardlined view on the Geneva

negotiations within the bureaucracy, ~~that as~~
there were real misgivings about what was being
done in Geneva, I can remember myself having
some at some point, on the theory that this was
going to create a situation that was going to
be highly unstable. Perhaps there was not
sufficient awareness ~~within~~
sort of the overall administration strategy here.
with respect to ^{the} relationship between Laos and
Vietnam.

~~INTERRUPTION~~

[BEGIN TAPE II SIDE II]

JOHNSON: Yes, that's right. I had forgotten that. Let's
see know, there is. . . . Yes, I remember this
point, skepticism, that's the one I want to come
around I think.

MOSS: The Rostow memo of the 21st of June, Next Steps
in Vietnam.

JOHNSON: Do you have the thing going?

MOSS: Yes, do you want me to turn it off?

JOHNSON: Yes, I guess I can comment on this. I don't think
one should really be surprised about Rostow
expressing skepticism with respect to what we or

the Vietnamese were doing. I think that skepticism was rather common in the government. Part of the problem here, I think, is this image that many people have that the policy was one of sink or swim with ~~that~~ ^{N. to Binh} Diem. That is much too simple a characterization of it, because people were very sensitive to the fact that Diem had demonstrated real limitations in the past, that there was continuing evidence that he wasn't capable or willing to do the things that we thought anyway should be done, sometimes he may have been right. Therefore this did run as a kind of a strand through the thinking of policy makers at this time, that we had adopted, as I indicated earlier, a posture of trying the Diem approach, that is to committing ourselves, recommitting ourselves to Diem and trying to see if we couldn't work through him. That's all I have to

say now. I think that in general one reason ^[Interruption] ~~that~~ Cottrell was chosen to head this task force was that he was a can-do guy and the theory was that he would ram things through or he ^{would} maneuver or he would in one way or another see that things got done, and that was very much what, in general, the Kennedy administration wanted. I mean they

JOHNSON:

in general felt that there weren't very many
can-do people in the State Department and I
think ^{that} from this point of view they were favor-
ably impressed. I think Cottrell's real limitation
was that paradoxically he was not very sensitive
to the political aspects of the various things
that he was involved in. But he did have Ben
Wood who was an old Vietnam hand and who was more
sensitive to this kind of thing.