

Michael V. Forrestal Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 8/14/1964
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Biographical Note

Forrestal (1927 - 1989), Assistant to the President for Far Eastern Affairs (1962 - 1962); senior staff member, National Security Council (1962 - 1967), discusses ambassador's role in Vietnam, the strategic hamlet program, the August 24th telegram and escalating tensions, among other issues.

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Michael V. Forrestal – JFK #3

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Third Oral History Interview

with

MICHAEL V. FORRESTAL

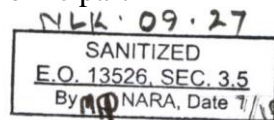
August 14, 1964

By Joseph Kraft

For the John F. Kennedy Library

KRAFT: I think the subject we want to cover tonight is mainly Vietnam. I think you came in right about the time of the Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] Report.

FORRESTAL: The Taylor/Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] Report. I think that General Taylor and Walt Rostow went out in December of 1961, if I'm not mistaken, at the request of President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] because the Viet Cong insurgency had reached a very high level of activity - much higher than in the previous six years since the Geneva Agreements. All the reports that I understand they had in Washington then indicated that the Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] Government might not be able to cope with this insurgency. So Taylor and Rostow went out and basically came back with a recommendation that the United States Government should essentially shift from conducting a conventional military advisory program, which essentially meant the delivery of certain technical vehicles, weapons and very few people, just to tell the government what the weapons were all about. It wasn't the effort that know today. This was a sort of government-to-government thing. We simply delivered them trucks and guns, and let them use them. The recommendation was to go much further than that, to actually send in advisors. They didn't recommend very many at the outset - and also a very significant increase in our economic program. The economic part



of the mission was essentially a recommendation that an economic expert team go out and review the economy of South Vietnam. This was called the Staley [Eugene A. Staley]-Duc team. Mr. Staley was an economist and Duc (who is now at the U.N., but then was a Minister of the Economy of South Vietnam) made a follow-up report. The net of

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this was that our Government got itself much more deeply involved in Vietnam than heretofore it had been, although it's quite clear that in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration we had a moral commitment to support Vietnam. What President Kennedy did was to translate that moral commitment into a much more material and practical one.

KRAFT: General Taylor did not recommend there be American troops sent for active combat? They were just advisors?

FORRESTAL: No. On the contrary, he considered doing that, but (I think this was something he and Walt Rostow considered rather closely, because a lot of people at that time thought that we should send a kind of expeditionary force there) they came back with the rather strong recommendation that this would be non-productive. If you sent white soldiers to fight, you were just coming back to do what the French had tried to do and failed at.

KRAFT: Now, this was all before you came on the scene, and when you came on the scene you were in the process of implementing it. Can you indicate some of the implementations? One of them was that there was a change in command in Vietnam, wasn't there?

FORRESTAL: Oh yes. That's about the first touch I had with it, and I'm not sure that I quite remember the precise date of this. It may have been as early as February. I think I was more preoccupied with Laos at the time, but it could have been February. I had the impression it was somewhat later. But one of the very first results was the realization that the old MAAG that we had, which, as I said, was nothing more than a

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conventional military assistance group, was not adequate to do the job. We needed to have something like a military theater command, rather than an advisory command. This problem, incidentally, produced an argument which is still not resolved in which President Kennedy used to dip into from time to time, but then would always back away from. You

know, Joe, that we have in the Pacific a specified and unified command known as CINCPAC (Commander in Chief Pacific).

KRAFT: That's a Navy Command.

FORRESTAL: It is occupied by an Admiral. It's a unified command in the sense that it has an army command underneath it and a Navy Command and an Air Force Command. Well, the question arose whether to create a new unified command which, of course, would have derogated from Admiral Felt's [Harry D. Felt] jurisdiction. Also, it would probably have exaggerated the military importance of the American effort in South Vietnam, and it wouldn't have been good politically. But then the other suggestion that some of us civilians made (including myself) without knowing quite what dangerous water we were stepping into, was that we just simply have a local theater commander (General Harkins [Paul D. Harkins] was the nominee of the Pentagon) and make him commander for all American forces in Vietnam and let him report directly to the Pentagon, to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Well, this, of course, was completely unacceptable to the JCS, who were very anxious not to disturb the treaty that they have arranged among themselves about who will have what unified commands; and they didn't want to derogate from Admiral Felt's position. So, we ended up with a really bastard-sort

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of arrangement, where General Harkins (who was known as COMUSMACV— Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam) reported to Honolulu, where Admiral Felt was. Admiral Felt would read his reports, digest them, rewrite them and then send them on to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This had a two-fold result. It meant that the Commander in Vietnam had no direct communication with Washington, first. It meant that the Commander in Vietnam got his orders from Honolulu (and Admiral Felt was a very meticulous sort of person. He used to give tactical instructions). Well, Honolulu doesn't know very much more about South Vietnam than Washington does. The only difference here is that people in Honolulu consider themselves in the military chain of command and like to give orders. It's very difficult for civilians even in the White House to read any military traffic, but occasionally I would get my hands on some of it. You'd find that Admiral Felt was telling General Harkins he thought that the battalion operation that was about to be conducted in Bac Lieu Province the following week ought to be changed because of the land and geographical terrain features which, in the opinion of CINCPAC, didn't suggest that the plan that had been submitted was a good plan. So they intervened in a very specific and tactical way. This never got straightened out.

KRAFT: Were there any nominees beside General Harkins? I see that he was appointed on February 8, 1962, which was right after the Taylor Report.

FORRESTAL: No. He was the nominee of the military establishment; and

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they don't nominate more than one person for a job like that. He was accepted without too much question.

KRAFT: And this question about nominating a theater commander with direct contact with the Pentagon never really got...

FORRESTAL: Oh yes. It got up to the President. Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and I did raise it with the President when it first came up. We told him that this didn't look like a very sensible arrangement. The President asked Max Taylor to look into it and see if we couldn't have a direct relationship between Washington, Max Taylor did look into it and reported that on balance it would be better, at least at the outset, not to try to disturb the existing arrangements that made CINCPAC the senior commander for the whole Pacific and Asian area. There was a compromise of a sort effected in order to justify a four-star general, which Harkins was. They made him, as well as being commander of the U.S. Forces in South Vietnam, also the commander of U.S. Forces in Thailand (Of course, we didn't have any U.S. forces in Thailand at that time, so this was a figment).

KRAFT: To give him more authority? That's how he became a four-star general?

FORRESTAL: Yes. To give him more authority.

KRAFT: A part of the Taylor Report, as I recall, had some political reforms and those seemed to vanish rather rapidly. What happened to those?

FORRESTAL: Yes, there was a whole list of political and economic steps that

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the Diem Government promised to take. It was something in the nature of an agreement between the U. S. Government and the Diem Government. I don't remember all of them, but one was land reform, another was devaluation of the currency to make it into a more acceptable, more rational system of currency. A third was election and the creation of an assembly that could actually function and be a sort of Parliament. Fourth was the creation of village councils and provincial councils - local government. And there were a number of others more technical steps, particularly in the economic field. These were really not in the nature of conditions to our aid. They were promises made by the Diem Government to us. Virtually none of them were completely carried out. Of course, looking back at it, or even at the time, a lot of people (including myself) thought that some of these demands on Diem were unrealistic. He couldn't do them, particularly the one about elections and the creation of a parliament and a sort of parliamentary-type of democracy. That was also unrealistic. But on others, like land

reform, he just never performed. And on most of the economic question he never performed. This was constantly an irritant between Washington and Saigon.

KRAFT: One of the other things that flowed out of the content of the Taylor Report was the dispatch of something like 15,000 men.

FORRESTAL: Yes, but we crept up to that, Joe. We never..there wasn't any understanding in the Taylor Report as such regarding the number of advisors we sent. I think we began actually with a 6,000 ceiling for awhile.

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When I got out to Saigon for the first time in the fall of 1962, we had gone up to 8, and then we kept going up, and, as you know, we finally reached 16,000 a couple of months ago. But it's been a continuous progression - never any real decision as to how many would be necessary.

KRAFT: Now, another thing that I think came out of that report is the strategic hamlet program.

FORRESTAL: Yes. I'm not quite clear how much the report focused on that. I think the report focused more on the concept of pacifying certain areas first, and then moving out from those areas to pacify others. The strategic hamlet program, I think, was largely the product of a man called Thompson, Bob Thompson, who is still in Vietnam. He was the last Minister of Defense in Malaysia and was Minister of Defense all during their emergency for 12 years. He had a lot to do in Malaysia with this technique of fortifying villages and providing government services for those villages and then expanding out from the villages into the countryside and eventually pacifying the whole countryside. Counselor Nhu[Ngo Dinh Nhu], Diem's brother, picked this up at about the time of the Taylor-Rostow Report and began to popularize the concept in Vietnam of the strategic hamlets. Of course, the Vietnamese have made several experiments before with something like this. They had their agrovilles and their fortified villages. But I think it was in February or March 1962 we had the first experiment by Counselor Nhu in his strategic hamlet program. It was a thing called Operation Sunrise. Perhaps one of the worst mistakes that has ever been made in Vietnam because all of the stories that we still read

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about these things being concentration camps, people being forcibly moved from their farms into a village and having to live behind barbed wire and all that sort of thing - that all comes out of the first pilot project of the strategic hamlet program known as Operation Sunrise. President Kennedy was appalled at the reports; and as I remember it, his main reason for asking me and several others to go out was to find out what had happened to what seemed to be a very good idea.

KRAFT: This was in the fall?

FORRESTAL: Yes. I finally went out in the fall, but it was in the summer that things began to happen.

KRAFT: What had happened?

FORRESTAL: Well, Nhu, who had gotten excited about this program, it turned out later that the reasons he was excited were largely political and not military. He picked a province north of Saigon which was largely under the control or influence of the Viet Cong, and he sent a very large number of troops up there (it was a rather poor province to begin with) who simply rounded up the peasants without any warning at all in their individual farms, burned their farms behind them so as to deny their houses to the Viet Cong, and forcibly incarcerated them (that is the only word you can use) into half-built villages. They weren't even really villages. They were just areas surrounded by barbed wire. The theory was that the peasants would build their own new houses and live in this compound and go out during the daytime and work the rice paddies. Well, of course, in addition to being pretty frightful by Western standards, to do this sort

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of thing in Vietnam is foolish, because every Vietnamese peasant believes as a matter of religious faith that his ancestors live on the land which he has farmed; and to be torn away from that is a pretty rough thing. So it was very unpopular and very badly carried out. But it only lasted for one month; and it was only in one province. Thereafter it was done much better and really quite successfully.

KRAFT: I think it was during this period that there occurred the attack of the two Vietnamese fliers on the Presidential palace in Saigon.

FORRESTAL: Yes. But that actually took place - you're quite right in the spring of 1962. I barely recollect that. There was an attempted coup against President Diem in December of 1960. This, in retrospect, was the beginning of Diem's troubles, because before that he had been a truly popular leader. There was no doubt about it, and there is no way of disputing the fact that, as Asian leaders go, he was not only popular himself, or revered, I think is much better word - he also acted like a free leader. He would go out into the countryside and meet people. He was accepted. He pretty well knew what was going on in his own country. In fact, he knew more than almost anybody else could possibly know. But after the attempted coup in 1960, December 1960, he naturally began to...had to be more careful about himself; and he withdrew from contact with his people. Then in the spring, I think, of 1962 two Vietnamese pilots, who it now turns out were not really part of any organized plot, took off one afternoon from Ton Son Nhut Airfield, zoomed

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over Independence Palace in the middle of Saigon, dropped I think three or four bombs rather accurately, and destroyed one wing of the palace. Actually they destroyed the wing where Madame Nhu [Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu] and Counselor Nhu lived, and then flew to Cambodia, where they stayed. This, I think... The first effect of this, of course, was that it made Diem issue orders that nobody should have any bombs on their airplanes except under very special circumstances; and it cut back very severely on the activities of the Vietnamese Air Force. But it had another more unpleasant effect. It removed him still further from contact with his people; and he began to get rather more morose and much more distant than he had been before. That was a very unfortunate thing to happen. Actually, I would say that it was almost from that second attack, at least in my recollection, that one began to see a change in the Vietnamese Government as a whole, especially towards Americans.

KRAFT: Can you say something about the military report, military results of the buildup? I take it that the first impressions were that it was proceeding satisfactorily.

FORRESTAL: Yes, I think it definitely was. We had had a bad period in 1960. I suppose even before that - 1959. Our MAAG advisors prior to the Taylor Report had done what you would expect MAAG advisors to do. They had trained the Vietnamese to build a conventional army based upon the American model. This, generally speaking, meant that you had a package of goods for a division shipped over from the States and dumped into Vietnam;

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and then you built the Vietnamese Army around this package of goods very much like an American Army. Well, the war by this time had begun to show that this kind of an organization (conventional type) was very ill-equipped to fight guerrillas - it couldn't move fast enough; and you didn't need divisions. What you wanted were smaller groups. So, after the Taylor Report which took this into account to a certain extent, instead of whole packages of divisions, we began sending over advisors to advise battalions and corps commanders. Unfortunately, we maintained for logistic purposes, the same structure in the physical assistance that we used to give the Vietnamese Army. So the result was that the Vietnamese, who themselves had been trained by the French, never did break down this conventional military organization. And even today they have it, so that although there was an improvement brought about largely by the fact that we had a number of young and rather flexible and aggressive American military officers sent over, who began to invent techniques of their own, nevertheless, the underlying concept of the Vietnamese Army and much of our own assistance was conventional. There was considerable improvement, I suppose, from 1962 (at least when I first saw it) the fall of 1962 and the reports that I read in the early part of 1962, down to about April, March or April 1963. If you could believe the statistics, there had been definite progress made.

KRAFT: What were the statistics?

FORRESTAL: Well, they were really of two basic sorts. There were the conventional military statistics based on a number of terroristic incidents

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that occurred, the number of military actions that occurred and in those actions the number of enemy killed, wounded, and missing and the number of friendly people killed, wounded and missing. Then on top of that the strategic hamlet program had its own set of statistics; and they would largely be statistics relating to the number of strategic hamlets per province that had been built. These statistics were a source of constant trouble, because as soon as you get numbers in Washington, the first tendency is, first of all, to believe them; and the second tendency is to plot them on a chart so you can establish trends. President Kennedy had, I think, probably an anti-statistic instinct. He would ask rather searching questions about where did these statistics come from? Who gives them to us? Well, we never really got the honest answer until much later. The honest answer is that the statistics came from the Vietnamese, not from our own people over there. Therefore, they were subject to all kinds of manipulations.

But even leaving the statistics aside, just on the basis of our direct observation, it was pretty clear that certainly in February and March when Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] and I visited for four weeks in South Vietnam, all signs were that overall considerable progress was being made despite certain soft areas. Despite the fact that the land reform program had been a complete failure; despite the fact that Diem had not introduced any of the fiscal reforms that we had asked him to; despite a certain amount of rumbling about Diem - on balance, you had to say that it looked as though

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the government forces were doing better than the Viet Cong.

KRAFT: You came from that visit with some recommendations to the President which included - what? Do you remember? And I think one of the elements there was the question of the use of air power, wasn't it? American air power and discrimination with effect to whom you were striking?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Hilsman and I wrote a report when we got back, to the President. He was very complimentary about it. His first reaction to it was, "Why the hell can't I get this kind of report from regular government people instead of from you two amateurs?" But the thrust of our report was that we were doing quite well; that it wasn't at all clear that we were winning in the long run. But it was certainly clear that we were doing better than we had in the past. And that there were some very big problem areas which, if they weren't solved or taken care of, would give us real trouble. The principal one on the military side was that both our own army and the

Vietnamese Army tended to want to fight the Viet Cong by whatever mechanical means they had at their disposal (artillery, air power, napalm - anything that you could get) and without much attention being paid to the populace. The Viet Cong strategy was never to fight the armies if they could possibly avoid it, but to aim every effort at getting control of the people. Their objective was the people - ours was the Viet Cong.

We had by that time an air force operation going out there where our own people were engaged in so-called combat training, known as the Farmgate Operation. It was classified at the time. Now it has become

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much more generally known, but we were actually flying on bombing missions with our own pilots with the Vietnamese sitting in the cockpits, going out against the targets selected by the Vietnamese themselves. They bombed the hell out of the villages with much - certainly without the Americans checking on what kind of villages these were. Of course, as soon as the planes were heard (the Viet Cong always knew well in advance when the planes were going to arrive) they'd get out and, of course, we and the Vietnamese ended up bombing peasants.

Another kind of thing that used to happen. They had these classic military sweep-up operations, where you get one or two battalions and a lot of American-supplied equipment and advisors clanking out over the countryside in pursuit of Viet Cong. They hardly ever made contact with any Viet Cong, but they almost always ran over a village and left that in flames and burning behind. This simply wasn't calculated to win the people. And actually, there was every evidence that these kinds of operations were very unproductive.

KRAFT: Were you able to do anything to minimize those?

FORRESTAL: Very little. We talked a lot to the military out there, including General Harkins, about it. Generally speaking, the better military officers would admit that this was probably a bad thing to do; but nobody seemed to be able to change it. Some military officers defended it on the grounds that the enemy is the enemy, and if you have to kill a few innocent people to get him, better kill innocent people. This was Admiral Felt's view.

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He used to send cables that had phrases like, "Burn them, blast them and bury them wherever you find them." And if this meant more napalm and more high-explosive bombs, well, you sent in more napalm, more high-explosive bombs. It was a repeat of the same mistake the French made.

KRAFT: What was the response from the Pentagon? Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and General Taylor?

FORRESTAL: Well, I think they were more impressed with that part of the report which suggested on balance we were doing well; and they were rather loath to step into what they considered to be a going operation and try to meddle with it from Washington. The President, after having read our report, talked a good deal to McNamara , but principally to General Taylor, who had just gone over to become Chairman of JCS sometime in this scenario; and I think a certain number of messages went out from the JCS asking questions about these techniques. One of the things that we had a lot of trouble with in the White House was crop destruction. President Kennedy was quite violent about that. He discovered that one of the techniques that was being used was the defoliation (the nice word - the more crude, destruction) of crops; the theory being that you could deny food to the Viet Cong if you did this. Well, of course, it's very difficult for a Vietnamese to distinguish between a Viet Cong and somebody who is loyal to the Government, and it is an impossible thing for Americans to do. So efforts were made to destroy crops and defoliate trees, and then we'd find out two things: first of all, the techniques that we were

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using to defoliate and to destroy crops were not any good, because they didn't either destroy the crops or clear the trees. They were using the wrong kind of machinery to do it with. But the propaganda the political penalties we were paying for this were enormous because a lot of innocent peasants were losing their rice and their food supplies; and this got to be quite unpopular. President Kennedy felt strongly about this, and he ordered a complete halt of all these operations until Jerry Wiesner [Jerome B. Wiesner] got into this. (He told Jerry Wiesner to take a look at this, and Jerry did and was appalled at what he found). We stopped it all. We conducted some experiments in the United States and, I think, in the Canal Zone to first of all find out a technique that would really be effective and precise and could be pinpointed. Then we went out to Saigon and said, "Now if you're going to do this (and we're somewhat doubtful whether it's a good thing to do) we're certain you should only do it where there is no normal cultivation - where you can be sure the only cultivation that you see has to be Viet Cong and nothing else." There are such areas in Vietnam in the uninhabited parts of the Central Plateau. And this was a running debate. President Kennedy looked at every one of those telegrams that went out. He was quite clear about it. He just didn't want to get involved in this kind of thing.

KRAFT: You were able to pinpoint the crop destruction somewhat?

FORRESTAL: Yes.

KRAFT: About this time there came out a U. S. government publication

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I think supported by the Report of the ICC with respect to North Vietnamese contributions to the Viet Cong insurgency. Can you say

something about that? What was behind this? The impact it had?

FORRESTAL: This was a constant issue between Washington and the field. There had been a White Paper done. I think it was called "The Threat to the Peace in Southeast Asia", which had drawn heavily from an ICC report which indicated that there was substantial (or at least significant in the sense of very important) infiltrations from North Vietnam into South Vietnam by way of Laos; and although the numbers weren't very high, (they were in the neighborhood of 1,800 to 2,000 a year, roughly 6 per day) they were very important kinds of people: politico/military types sent down from Hanoi, and a lot of arms and ammunition, and probably some gun powder and other things the Viet Cong used. It looked in 1963 at any rate that the Vietnamese were on the way to taking care of their problem despite this infiltration. Everybody recognized, including President Kennedy, that sooner or later you'd have to face the problem of how to stop this infiltration; but President Kennedy believed (and most of his advisors believed) that you didn't have to attack Cambodia and Laos just because these two very small and weak countries were unable to control the infiltration from Hanoi. What you did was to encourage a successful executive of the strategic hamlet program inside South Vietnam, then you dealt with the infiltration. And you dealt with it by whatever means you have to deal with it. But you didn't allow it to distract your attention from doing the real job inside South Vietnam.

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KRAFT: What was the rationale for that position?

FORRESTAL: There were two main reasons: First of all, there was the immediate reason that the South Vietnamese didn't have enough assets (military assets) to control its own borders. It would have required a massive land army - a very, very large one, at least as large as the French had in addition to the Vietnamese's own army, to do this. And this would have distracted the Vietnamese from their own internal problems, which were largely civil and political (or at least as much civil and political as they were military). But the other reason, which was just as cogent (perhaps more cogent for us) was that we had an international problem here. Cambodia was a neutral country, at that time trying honestly to control Viet Cong infiltration, but incapable of doing it with an army of 30,000 men. Trying to control a 700-mile border with an army of 30,000 men is just not possible, especially in the jungle. Laos was in no shape to cope with this problem. It was having its own problems. So that was the second reason. You just didn't want to have this thing come up at that time.

Since then, however, the infiltration thing has changed a good deal. It's a different problem now, bigger in scope, bigger in intensity; and your Laotian and Cambodian situations suggest that you probably can do something about it.

KRAFT: One of the issues that came up also in this period was the question of the Ambassador. Wasn't he under some kind of instructions, I think, of enforcing - or of taking a very strong stand on behalf of the

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reform? Was it the American Legion speech that he gave, or a speech he gave in South Vietnam?

FORRESTAL: Yes, that's right. Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] did that once upon a time. Nolting, I believe, went out as Ambassador (I have to check these dates), but I think he went out in December about the same time as Taylor – shortly after the Taylor Report. Prior to that time we had Durby Durbrow [Eldridge Durbrow] there, a fellow whom I used to work for in Moscow fifteen years ago. Durbrow took a very hard line with Diem. He used to bang his fists on the table and shout. He had pushed for all these reforms, the same ones that were in the Taylor Report. He had gotten himself so unpopular in Vietnam that he accomplished very little. So he was withdrawn. Then we sent out Ambassador Nolting who really had two problems instantly when he got there. One was his relationship with our own military establishment, which was getting very large and very powerful; and the other was his relationship with the Vietnamese Government. His oral instructions from President Kennedy when he first went out were with respect to the Vietnamese Government: don't try to order them around - that hasn't worked. Besides it isn't the relationship we want to have. You've got to be persuasive, and you can use carrots and sticks to be persuasive, but they've got to be made into partners of ours. And his second order was (this later turned out to be a mistake) that he was the chief American representative in Vietnam, responsible for everything that went on in that country except for military activities. You remember President Kennedy put out a letter to all Ambassadors.

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KRAFT: Well, there were country team letters.

FORRESTAL: That's right, the country team letters. The idea was that the Ambassador was to be in charge of everything. Well, that letter had an exception in it for cases where there were active military operations going on in which Americans were involved, in which case the Ambassador became a sort of an advisor to the generals. Furthermore, there was a treaty entered into between the State Department and the Defense Department which took the form of another letter (from the Secretary of State this time). In all honesty, if I were Ambassador Nolting, I would have read this letter just the way he did read it. It made him a subordinate of the military establishment.

KRAFT: This was a letter from the Secretary of State or Defense to the Ambassador?

FORRESTAL: From both to the Ambassador. I can't remember now, it may have been just the Secretary of State. It made quite clear to Nolting that wherever a military matter was concerned, he was subordinate to

Harkins; wherever political matters were concerned, it was vice versa. This never worked, because you can't distinguish in this kind of a war what is political and what is military.

KRAFT: Can you date this letter approximately?

FORRESTAL: At the time he was sent out there, I think it was December of 1961 or January of 1962 - roughly. That was changed when Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] went out there. No, as a matter of fact, it wasn't changed. It is changed now, but it wasn't changed when Lodge went out there. Lodge picked it up

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pretty quickly though and asked questions about it.

KRAFT: What about the relations between Ambassador Nolting on the one hand and the Government on the other hand with these military people?

FORRESTAL: He was very close with Harkins. They got along very well. My impression is (and this, by the way, you must take with a grain of salt, and is based upon a series of visits out there, no one of which was more than four weeks and most of them a week or ten days at a time) that he had a close, effective working relationship with Harkins, but it was of a subordinate nature. Harkins would ask him his opinion - but Harkins took the decisions, certainly on any physical thing. I think Nolting spent most of his time, and he did it quite effectively, greasing the lines of communication between President Diem and Diem's government and our own government. On a couple of occasions (and the speech you refer to was on) on instructions from the Department (Harriman [William Averell Harriman] was then Assistant Secretary of State) make strong representations to Diem. Occasionally Harriman would wire Nolting that you've just got to make more of a point of some of these things. I think the one that speech was about was largely on economic matters and possibly on land reform.

KRAFT: This would be the speech to the American Club in Saigon, I think. And it was read as a kind of blanket and total endorsement of the Diem Government by the United States, because he said something about anyone who is not supporting Diem is working against us.

FORRESTAL: I think that's right. I think that was an interesting speech. The reason it was given in the first instance was that he was asked to

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make certain points about the economy, the necessity for being a little

bit more austere, not having quite such a high standard of living in Saigon and such a low standard outside of Saigon. But he did turn it into a speech in support of President Diem. But that, you see, was our policy at the time. And although some people may raise an eyebrow about this, we were committed to support this man in carrying out the struggle.

KRAFT: I think this brings us to the Buddhist episode, because up until then particularly at the time of your visit, you felt that there was a steady improvement. So let's get on with the beginning of that episode. What the reaction was and what happened thereafter? When did that begin?

FORRESTAL: May 8th really. The extraordinary thing about the Buddhist episode was that prior to the incident at Hue, no American, that is no American whose report was read in Washington, was aware that there was an incipient problem between Buddhists and Catholics. This had never come up before in our experience in Vietnam, and the French, so far as I know, either never told us or never experienced the problem. I don't think I have to go back in detail for you. You remember that it was one of those terrible accidents where a bunch of police officers who had been badly instructed got out of hand and shot people. Then there's a reaction. And the police have to react more harshly; and within a matter of days this thing had built up from a rather minor incident into a national tragedy.

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KRAFT: What was the American position following this?

FORRESTAL: Immediately following it, the whole thrust of the American policy was to do everything to dampen it down. Of course we didn't have any contact with the Buddhists. We didn't even know who they were. We didn't have their names or the faintest idea of what their organization was all about. We knew who the Catholics were because the Government was Catholic. So of course our immediate effort was on the Government. It was generally, "For heaven's sake, stop this as fast as you can, The whole thing was a terrible accident to begin with - you admit that it was. Now, say that it was an accident." We were behaving like good Americans at this point, doing what you would do in this country. You would admit that there had been a terrible mistake made. Call the parties in and find out what their grievances were, and if they were at all legitimate, correct them quickly. The whole thought being that if you correct them quickly enough, then you defuse the problem. But if you are reluctant and you don't give in or give them quite enough, it will just get worse and worse.

Well, President Diem just didn't see it this way at all; and Nolting, I must say (his subsequent behavior wasn't too good) but in this particular instance he went in again and again to see Diem to persuade and cajole and beg him not only to grant the Buddhist demands (which at that time appeared to be superficially very reasonable) but to go a little further and give them a bit more so as to turn their own political machinations against them. But Diem never saw it that way. He saw this as an affront to government authority that had to be stamped out before it started. It

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didn't make any difference who was right or wrong as far as he was concerned. The offense was an offense against the State, and the State couldn't survive if it permitted this offense to go unpunished. Even if the State were at fault! This was his Mandarin-French theory; and he was of course encouraged in this by his brother and sister-in-law.

KRAFT: Does President Kennedy come into this? Did this matter particularly startle him?

FORRESTAL: He came into it very heavily while it was happening. He sensed within hours after this happened that this was going to be a very difficult problem for him. He said, on one occasion, "Mike, I just cannot have a religious war out there. It isn't just that I'm a Catholic myself, and therefore in an immensely difficult position. It's just that to add to all our other difficulties in Vietnam the prospects of a religious conflict will make this problem completely unmanageable. I know about religious conflicts. I know how strongly people feel. And this will be just as bad as or worse than the Viet Cong/Government conflict if it gets out of hand." He felt this very, very strongly; and he was largely responsible or he and Harriman both, for pushing Nolting to go in and try to get Diem to do what seemed to be right.

KRAFT: And did the Buddhist conflict from that point on get steadily worse?

FORRESTAL: Yes. There was a moment when it looked as if Diem had appointed a commission of Buddhists and Catholics to review the demands of the Buddhists. He actually, as a result of the deliberations of this commission, accepted their six principles - demands which were not actually outrageous. They simply wanted to be able to have their

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demonstrations on their religious holidays. They wanted to carry a flag. They wanted the same property rights, the rights to own church property that the Catholics had; and they wanted the same rights of organization that the Catholics had. But by the time that Diem acceded to those demands, the Buddhists had realized that they were on to a good thing and they were getting quite political. And they began to put forward essentially unreasonable demands, which he couldn't very well accede to. This was all over a period of a month - June. He didn't accede. I can't remember when the first bonze burned himself, but it was probably sometime in June. That really started the thing getting worse.

KRAFT: What were the military consequences of this, or weren't there any?

FORRESTAL: At the beginning there weren't. As the summer wore on there began to be, largely among the officer corps, which was probably 50% Catholic and 50% Buddhists. There began to be a division among officers. And then it began to spread to some extent to the ranks. But it never became a dangerous problem with the military. It was more of an internal problem. All during this time our officials in Saigon, our own military and our Embassy including Nolting kept telling Washington not to get too disturbed about this...that it wasn't too bad. Diem was still very much in control; and he could take care of it. But of course, as we know, it didn't work out that way.

KRAFT: How did the Buddhist crisis trench what became the crisis of the Diem Government? Or wasn't there a direct connection?

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FORRESTAL: Very direct. Yes, very direct. It was all part of it, because, as I said earlier, Diem had shown signs of losing touch with what was going on in his own country before. He went out much less, he wouldn't go out into the provinces and tour around as much as he used to. The Buddhist crisis, of course, made him even more of a prisoner of his palace. And it did another thing which was even more dangerous - it made Nhu a prisoner of the palace. Neither of them ever went out. I forgot to say that, almost the same day that Diem agreed to the Buddhist demands, Madame Nhu made a speech at the Women's Solidarity League or one of her own organizations there denouncing the Buddhists in violent terms. This, of course, had the effect of making things worse. Even if the Buddhists had been willing to make any compromises, after this speech of Madame Nhu's they weren't willing at all. But what happened was that the immolations of the bonzes, coupled with Madame Nhu's increasingly violent statements and the Government's retreat from the concessions that it had made before, forced lines to be drawn - hard lines, largely in the cities. Of course, it's quite clear the Buddhist organizations were about as much at fault as the Government was. They were getting more and more intransigent and more and more political in their protests. There were suspicions of Communist influence, but there has never been any evidence of anything more than neutralist influence in the Buddhists - possibly some Liberation Front influence. Primarily, this was strictly a political/religious controversy that got worse and worse. Finally, in July (late June - early July) Diem began to resort to old-fashioned police techniques to try to stamp the thing out. He began to arrest

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people right and left. Well, that's like the old Chinese saying about riding a tiger - once you start doing that, of course, you have to do more and more and more of it. Even before the attack on the pagodas, I believe he had arrested something like 3,000 people. Now this wasn't just any 3,000 people. These were the elite people. These were largely French-speaking, highly intelligent people of whom he was afraid because they might start a coup. Then there were student demonstrations and he arrested a lot of students. I think at one fell

swoop they picked up 600 or 1000 students. And the city of Saigon became a city of terror. I was out there in July. Of course, the Vietnamese exaggerate everything and they talk too much. The impression was a city sick with fear. You just couldn't go anywhere or talk to anybody but what they didn't tell you probably an untrue story about some close relative that had been arrested in the middle of the night and had his head beaten by police and never seen again.

KRAFT: It was during this period, I think before the attack on the pagodas, that the fight with Madame Nhu began. Didn't she make a speech accusing the United States of trying to shove her out?

FORRESTAL: Yes. There were several rather evil influences that were at work. Madame Nhu, after her speech to the Women's Solidarity League, began putting out statements, especially statements about the bonzes. I think she said that the barbecuing of bonzes was something that gave joy to a great many people; and she noted this was done with American gasoline. She was also surprised that there were always American newspaper correspondents around whenever a bonze burned. Gradually

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her speeches developed more and more of an anti-American tone. Not really anti-American so much as it was anti-official American. She began to accuse various elements of the Embassy, and the military even, of fomenting the Buddhists. She also had a newspaper in Saigon called the "Times of Vietnam" which she controlled pretty much and wrote the editorials for it to some extent. It was run by two Americans (a Mrs. Gregory and her husband) which put out very violent anti-American statements. Nolting was never much affected by this. He kept trying to persuade Diem to cooperate. Nolting tried very hard to be sure that everybody in his own Embassy continued wholeheartedly to support Diem. Of course by this time our own people in the field, particularly in Saigon were beginning to split. This worried President Kennedy, because beginning sometime in June or July the reporting out of Saigon began to show distinct signs that the American community was beginning to divide up.

KRAFT: Along what lines?

FORRESTAL: Well, along basically pro-Diem and anti-Diem. Largely it was a matter of civilians minus Nolting against the military with Nolting. As this division got deeper and deeper, it was reflected not only in the cables, but also in the newspaper reports we were getting. Columnists, or the newspapermen (most of them young people) were obviously intensely affected by the atmosphere in the city. Everybody was - there was no way of avoiding it. So their reporting began to get highly biased about this time -colored I would say rather than biased. And the inevitable things began to happen. Our own people were split, the Diem Government split, and

this got the Vietnamese military concerned. I guess no one knows yet the details of what Counselor Nhu was doing all this time. I think everybody agrees that he was probably the evil genius. Whether or not Madame Nhu was involved, I don't know. But it is generally known that Nhu himself was doing some very strange maneuvers at this period. There is some evidence that he was negotiating with Hanoi. If not directly, at least indirectly with the Viet Cong. He boasted about it. Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop] had a column about it, and there is some truth in it...no one knows how much. Nhu's own writings badly over-estimated the progress that had been made in the war against the Viet Cong. President Kennedy noticed this. He called my attention once to something I hadn't read before - a speech, an article that Nhu had written about three months before, setting out his philosophy on the ideal government for South Vietnam. First, Nhu thought the war was about to end, that the strategic hamlet program had been an unqualified success; second, the Americans were no longer necessary for this reason; and third, that he might be strong enough to bargain with Hanoi on this basis, using the withdrawal of the Americans as the basis of his argument. And lastly, that his theory for his own country was that you had to eliminate the power of the colonial clique that had run the country - the colonialized Vietnamese - and replace them with a new source of political power - the peasant commune. The strategic hamlet (in Nhu's concept) was almost exactly like a commune - a Communist commune.

KRAFT: Mike, it was during this period, that is in the summer or maybe even earlier, that the question of Ambassador Nolting's tenure or possible replacement came up. Can you say something about that?

FORRESTAL: Yes. There had been a feeling in the State Department, I think it was largely Harriman and myself and the rest of the Far Eastern Bureau, shared somewhat by people in the White House other than myself, that Ambassador Nolting had gotten himself into a deeply unfortunate position of being so thoroughly identified with the Diem regime, that he had lost his capacity to influence President Diem. A number of people from Washington had gone over to Saigon during this period, spring and summer 1963, and had observed Nolting with Diem. It was quite clear that Nolting respected Diem but the reverse wasn't true. And you had a very strong impression that our Ambassador had gotten himself to the point where Diem no longer really believed or took seriously what he said. I think actually Nolting may have realized this a little bit himself, because in May he sent word to Washington in a letter that he felt he was coming toward the end of his tour and at some appropriate time he would really like to leave. He had been there almost two years. I think it was the climate, and as I remember it, he cited a personal problem. He had two daughters in school here - one of whom was in some sort of difficulty, and he felt that the problem was that he had been away from home so long that he really needed to get back. Of course, that put up the problem of how to find a new ambassador, particularly at this intensely difficult period that we were going into. Hilsman, who, I think by this time, had become Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, I think

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as early as April, had put up to the Secretary of State a list of possible ambassadors. All of them were career people. I remember Ed Gullion [Edmund A. Gullion] was on the list. I think our Ambassador in Lebanon, Ambassador McKnight, was also on the list; a number of others - all of them career people - Freeman [Orville Lothrop Freeman] from Bolivia, I think was on it. But the Secretary of State made no move. This is traditional with him. He used to be very slow about making choices about ambassadors. Time went on and we got no decision. Events were getting worse, and it became clearer to everybody here that Nolting - it wasn't so much a question of him personally but as a tool, he had become a blunt instrument and was no longer as useful as he should be.

A very peculiar thing happened at that point. A number of us (I think Mac, myself, Harriman) had gone to the President from time to time and said, "Look, we have to have an Ambassador, and the Secretary hasn't made any choice." Kennedy's reaction was, "Well, tell that to Rusk [Dean Rusk] - not me. I don't feel that I can appoint another ambassador without consulting him." So efforts were made to stimulate the Secretary of State, but all to no avail. The President got more and more impatient with Rusk. "This is just the kind of thing that has been happening all the time. He won't make up his mind. He won't make a decision, and then of course he'll force me to do it, and he'll be very unhappy that this decision is taken out of his hands. Then I have to do it pretty soon." Then he began asking people for suggestions on ambassadors. I must say we had a hell of a time thinking of the right kind of ambassador, but various people had their candidates. Then one day I was up in the President's

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office, again talking about ambassadors to Saigon (It was early afternoon). I went out of his office and back to my own and over to the State Department to do some business. Very late that evening I came back to the White House (It must have been about 7:30), walked into the President's office, and found Mac Bundy there. Mac was actually in Evelyn Lincoln's [Evelyn L. Lincoln] office. The President was sitting on the edge of Evelyn Lincoln's desk. Mac turned as I walked in the door and said, "Mr. President, ask Forrestal what his opinion is. He feels more strongly about this than I do." And the President said, "Mike, what do you think about Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador to Vietnam?" I said, "It would be a disaster, Mr. President. You cannot do it." He said, "Why do you think that?" And I said, "Well, I think first of all, he's a Republican, and he's an insensitive man. His experience in the UN is not good. He can't work with his staff; he can't work with the Department of State. And he's just too complicated a person to have over there at this particular time." The President said absolutely nothing - he just looked at me. He had a way of looking at you with his eyes suddenly opened very wide; and he just stared directly at you and said nothing. There was a long pause and then Mac and I finally walked out of the office. We met Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] in the hall as we walked out, and Ralph said, "You know the Secretary of State just came out of the President's office, and you know what he said to me? The Secretary said, 'You fellows over here don't make every decision, you know' and smiled and

walked on." Well, it turned out, of course, the following morning, that Rusk had proposed Lodge and Lodge had been accepted by the President. Of course, the

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paradox of this story is that Lodge turned out to be an extraordinarily able envoy; and most of us who worried about it turned out to be wrong.

KRAFT: We left this story just about the beginning of crescendo of the Buddhist incident, the burnings and reprisals, the arrests and the attacks culminating in the attacks on the pagodas on the 21st of August, which produced a major policy - you wouldn't call it a turn - but a major policy step by the United States. How did that come about and how was it initiated and what steps were taken?

FORRESTAL: This was really the worst period with respect to Vietnam. Nolting had gone on leave in, I believe, June. He had left Trueheart in charge, who was the DCM - Bill Trueheart [William C. Trueheart]. And during that period, while Nolting was away - it was June and much of July - the civil disturbances and the violations of civil rights (if you want to call it that) in the city of Saigon and subsequently in the city of Hue had increased very rapidly to the point where it was quite clear that either we got Diem to change, or we would have a terribly hard time justifying continued support of Diem.

Anyway, by late July and early August the culmination of all these unpleasant events, the arrest of the students, the stories about torture, the arrest of not only little people but the arrest of family members of government ministers, and ultimately the arrest of families of generals had reached the point where the city of Saigon was very near a complete breakdown and a complete revolt. This brings us down to August. I think Nolting by this time had come back from vacation, but he was only there for two weeks. About the 15th of August or so, he flew to Honolulu,

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and Lodge flew out from Washington. While they were in Honolulu, August 20th occurred. The Diem police agents - actually the special forces plus the combat police (sort of rough-neck types) some of them dressed as regular soldiers to disguise themselves, and some of them dressed as civil policemen burst into four Saigon pagodas - principally the Xa Loi Pagoda, which was the headquarters for the Buddhist movement. They arrested a lot of people. It was then claimed they killed several. That's never been substantiated, but they did arrest a great many, and they did beat them up rather badly and took them all out. Nhu immediately claimed that the whole thing was the Army's idea. He got the Army to issue a communique to that effect. They were forced to do this. They, of course, subsequently denied it.

KRAFT: Weren't you getting some intelligence reports?

FORRESTAL: Yes, we were getting intelligence reports that suggested that Nhu had done this to the Army, but they weren't definitive reports, but they sounded right. In a day or two the Army began backing down from this communique.

KRAFT: But there was no intelligence problem at that point? There were some stories to the effect that the CIA man out there, who had been close to Nhu was either taken in or was covering for Nhu and had...

FORRESTAL: [REDACTED] There were those who believed in Washington that [REDACTED] was so close to Nhu that he was distorting the reporting. It is simply not true. Actually, it was the CIA, much more than any other outfit in our community out there that was providing

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two kinds of reports. First of all, the most detailed sort of reporting on the activities of the police. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The other type of reporting they were putting out was of course coup rumour reporting. [REDACTED]

I think Nolting was out there, and I think Nolting and he were carrying out fixed policy. But generally speaking, one couldn't detect in [REDACTED] attitude any particular bias towards Nhu. It is true, however, [REDACTED] continued presence in Saigon made a lot of Vietnamese believe that we still continued despite what anybody said - or what Lodge said after he arrived there - we still continued to support the Diem regime.

KRAFT: But I think we've got a little bit ahead, because right after the incident of the pagoda there was the famous telegram of August 24th. Will you say something of the genesis and how did that come about? Who did it? What were the positions inside the Government?

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FORRESTAL: That was an extraordinary experience that I hope will never happen again. During the ten days preceding August 24th Washington had received a volume - a veritable flood - of extra intelligence and reporting on the near collapse of the administration of government in Saigon. It had gone beyond just the social problem of beating people up. Vouchers were not being signed to get food and materials out to the front. Munitions were being held up. Civil servants were going on vacation, or at least refusing to turn up at the office; and we began for the first time to get reports from the field, not so much that there was political disaffection, but that the war was grinding to a halt. That troops were not moving. What was actually happening was the troops were being redeployed to support a coup. But this gave a sensation in Washington that this whole thing could collapse rather quickly, so there was considerable amount of tension for practical reasons, plus a certain amount of emotion. Could the United States long remain associated with this kind of suppressive activity? It all came to a head in the ten days prior to August 24th; and it got a big kick, of course, when the pagodas were invaded. I believe it was on a Thursday. This would have been two days after the pagodas (I believe the 24th was a Saturday) that Harriman asked me - in a way he very often asked in the course of business - whether I thought we could continue to support President Diem, and didn't we now have to let it be known that if he continued this kind of activity, we couldn't support him. And I said, I thought so. I said we would have to give him a notice that

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we were going to have to disassociate ourselves from these police activities, because we think they are going to lose him very quickly. Hilsman for some time had felt this way strongly. The President had been worried but had never expressed an opinion one way or the other. General Taylor was also worried, but felt that although there was a real problem, we didn't know what might come next, and we were certainly not prepared to organize or engineer any coup on our own, because we didn't know who had the troops. McNamara, who was on vacation, hadn't addressed himself to the situation. No other civilian in the Pentagon, Bill Bundy [William P. Bundy] least of all, had any connection with this at all. I believe he was on vacation. He went away for about a month during this whole thing - took a trip to Europe, so he wasn't involved in it. McCone [John A. McCone], whose Agency was the source of much of this material, had also gone away on a vacation for a week prior to this. So the situation you had on Friday was the President about to leave for Hyannis, Bundy about to leave for Manchester, Secretary Rusk was out of town (I can't remember where he was). McNamara was in Aspen. Taylor was here. McCone was on a yacht in Puget Sound, so you didn't have much of a Government. On Friday night, the twenty-third, Hilsman prepared a draft cable. He called me up on Saturday morning and showed it to me.

Let me backtrack just a little bit. For several weeks, or at least

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two weeks before this date, particularly after the attack on the pagodas, groups of military officers had come to various officers, both military and civilian, in our Mission in Saigon and said they wanted to mount a coup against Diem and asked what was our attitude.

KRAFT: These were South Vietnamese?

FORRESTAL: These were South Vietnamese. Officers - and some very high ranking ones. The standard answer at that time was, of course, that we were completely against a coup, and furthermore we would take action to prevent it to the extent that we could; that we wholeheartedly supported the government of President Diem - and please stop talking this way. Well, the cable which was addressed to Lodge told him (Lodge had only been there for two days before he got this cable) that unless he had objections, he was to let it be known discreetly, if asked, that the United States does not support the actions of the Government of Vietnam, the repressive actions that they have undertaken in the past several weeks; that it views with concern the effect that these actions have already had on the war; and is worried that they will have a very deleterious effect on the war effort. And that was about the substance of it.

KRAFT: Did the President have a hand in that?

FORRESTAL: Oh, yes. I'll tell you about that. It started with Roger, then I think, if my memory is correct, before I got it Roger took it to Harriman. Harriman made some changes in it; they brought it to me. I called George Ball [George W. Ball] to be sure that George had seen it. I sent the

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cable on the wire to the President in Hyannis, telling him that George Ball and Harriman and Hilsman had all considered the cable and this was their best judgment. I then called (this is now Saturday afternoon) Roz Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric], who was at his farm. I read the thing to him twice over, and Roz's reaction was, which I think was a quite proper reaction, "This is a political matter. I don't see that the Defense Department can have much of a position on this except that I want to be certain - I want you to assure me that the senior people in the State Department are all in agreement on this." And I told him Harriman, Hilsman and Ball (Rusk is away) - So that's what you've got there.

He said, "Has the President seen it?" And I said, "It has been sent up to the President, but he hasn't reacted." Then I called Brute Krulak [Victor H. Krulak], who was in my office while I was making these calls, and I said, "Brute, we have to get General Taylor," and Brute said, "Well, I'll go right out and get him." I gave him a copy of the cable, and he disappeared. In the meantime, the President called down and said, "I want to talk to George Ball and Harriman about this telegram. Where are they?" I said I would get hold of them and get in touch. Well, Ball was out on the golf course, and Harriman and Hilsman drove out, picked him up at the golf course. They drove back to Ball's house. Ball and the President had a conversation, to which I was not a party. I understand subsequently that the President asked that the phrase which began "...unless you have serious objections.... The President struck the word "serious" and said, "...unless you perceive some objection" etc.

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In the meantime, I got hold of Krulak - or Krulak called back (I guess I finally called him). This was about 7 o'clock in the evening. I said, "Brute, has the General seen this? And what does he say?" I have a very clear recollection about this, although subsequently the General has denied it. Brute said, "Yes, he has seen it, and it's all right with him if everybody else is in agreement." So I indicated that all these people had cleared this cable. I checked again with the President; and he said he was all signed off on it. This was all Saturday night.

KRAFT: And there had been no plenary meetings on it?

FORRESTAL: There had been no meeting on this thing, which was a mistake. Not so much a mistake in what happened, but a mistake because the Government did not reach a formal consensus, as it quickly turned out. And this way my mistake. I had not had enough experience in organizing - orchestrating this kind of matter to realize that you had to get these men together, and that a week-end was no time to do it, especially when many were off on vacation in various places. The cable went out at about 9 o'clock. The cable also had been cleared by Dick Helms [Richard M. Helms] in the CIA. There were two very important added details here. On that Saturday Roger Hilsman had a telephone call from Admiral Felt, CINCPAC. Roger told me that Admiral Felt had said, "Roger, I hope you do what is necessary we've got to stop this thing. You've got to persuade people in Washington to effect a change in government out there." Which I think moved

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Hilsman more than it should have. And Felt actually sent a cable to that effect to the Joint Chiefs, which we had a lot of trouble finding later on. And the second thing that happened was the Helms (McCone being away) was also called by Roger to have said, "Thank God, you people have finally made a decision. Now we've got to go out and get it done. It has got to be done quickly and efficiently, otherwise we're in very bad trouble." You can see that there was a strong desire to effect a change in Saigon among people who would normally be very conservative.

The President, however, made it quite clear that a change in government wasn't really what he wanted to have. He wanted to bring pressure on Diem to change his ways. That was his intention. Well, then came Sunday. McNamara came back. McCone came back, and they met on Sunday. We met again on Monday, and on both occasions there was a considerable amount of: "My God, was this the right thing to have done!" And we began sending out cables cutting back on the earlier instructions, which Lodge had not had time to carry out. In the meantime, we kept getting more coup rumours - reports of coup talk. I don't believe that the full thrust of the Saturday cable was ever communicated in full effect to anybody.

But on Monday McNamara, Taylor, McCone, Harriman, Rusk, Ball - the whole Government met in the Cabinet Room with the President the way it should have been in the

first place. They talked this thing back and forth. There was a lot of heat. The military argument generally being: We don't know what's coming next. We can't afford to play this

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this kind of game without knowing. The Vice President was also there. His contribution was a reference to a quotation that went something like "Let us not jump into the evil whereof we know not, better to remain with the evil which we know." He really felt quite strongly about that.

FORRESTAL: It seems to me there was a meeting every day for the rest of the week. Instructions went out telling Lodge don't make any strong moves until we have a better idea of who's doing what to whom, where the power lies, who will be the successor government if there is one, keep the reports coming in but don't stimulate anything. This was largely a McNamara approach. Let's find out what we're getting into before we jump. So we retreated somewhat. And this situation sort of continued on for about three or four weeks.

KRAFT: Wasn't there some issue at this point of [REDACTED] continuing foreign aid? Weren't there specific things that were at least under consideration.

FORRESTAL: Yes, there were. The cutting off of aid as nearly as I can determine looking back on it was an accident. It was not something that was the subject of an NSC decision. What the President's group was most concerned about was trying to find out whether or not any group of generals had the courage, the determination and the force to take over quickly from Diem in the event that there was a coup. We started out by thinking that there was such a group of generals. The reports indicated that there were. General Minh [Duong Van "Big Ming" Minh] was the best. Max Taylor knew him very

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well; he had been a good friend. He was the person on whom most eyes were fixed. I think in the middle of September Minh indicated that he really was not interested in trying to run a coup against President Diem; and that put a real damper on all action.

KRAFT: I take it at the end of September there was a McNamara-Taylor Mission.

FORRESTAL: We all went out. Everybody went out.

KRAFT: You were out on that as well?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Not Rusk. Just McNamara and Taylor. Prior to that time...I think that was late September if I'm not mistaken.

KRAFT: Yes. Third week in September.

FORRESTAL: At the middle of August the AID Agency, quite independent of any coup considerations, decided that temporarily they should suspend the commodity import program to Vietnam for two reasons. First of all, they were afraid of being subjected to criticism, congressional criticism, for continuing any aid which was not really essential. We had so much in the country they felt we could stop this for a few weeks and it wouldn't make any difference at all. Commodity imports were not really essential to the war effort when all these unfortunate events were occurring. And of course they continued to occur. Things just got worse and worse as August drew to a close and September started. But that decision was taken as an administrative matter by the AID Agency itself. The thought was that they would do it for a week or two and probably this would all blow over and everything would be all right. They failed to

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realize that once having taken such a decision, it was almost impossible to reverse it without giving the wrong kind of a signal. When McNamara and the rest of us found out that this had happened, I suppose a week or so after it had been cut, he said, "Well, there's no point in arguing it now. It can't be undone. We're stuck with that whether we like it or not." I think fundamentally he agreed that probably it was a good idea. But he was a little annoyed about its happening without a governmental decision. And he was, of course, right about that. There was such confusion and such a real divergency of opinion between the Department of State and the AID agency on the one hand, who were getting reports from civilian sources and the military on the other. The kind of reports the civilian agencies were getting went far beyond the simple matter of Diem's being unpopular. We were beginning to get reports from the countryside that the whole strategic hamlet program was going to pieces, and that maybe it had never been much to begin with. There were beginning to come in from the civilians in the field suggestions that instead of there being 300 hamlets in Province X, there were only 25 or 30. That there had been distortion and misrepresentation in the Provincial Reports. Communication between the Americans in the field and local officials were breaking down. We weren't able to talk to Vietnamese much anymore. That was on the civilian side. On the MILITARY side, however, the statistics kept pouring in. We still have X number of hamlets - so many enemy killed in action - weapon losses favorable to the government and so on and so on. This produced some very tough

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meetings for the President. There is one that is worth mentioning because it gives you a taste of what his problem was at that time. Two officials came back from Saigon - a man called Rufus Phillips [Rufus I. Phillips] and a man called Joseph Mendenhall [Joseph A. Mendenhall]. Phillips was in charge of all of the AID activities outside of Saigon, and he

had about sixty people scattered throughout the provinces from whom he had reports. It was a very tightly knit team. Most of these men - and particularly Phillips - were very emotional about their program. They figured they were really winning the war because they were out there with the pigs and the fertilizer and all that sort of thing. Mendenhall was a more experienced political reporter, who was serving in the Embassy as, I think, First Secretary and had a lot of Vietnamese acquaintances in the elite group in Saigon. At the same time, Brute Krulak, my favorite Marine general, had come back from a special trip at Taylor's request. A three day trip. And he had visited in three days - I don't know how he did it - every single sector advisor in the country, which means 43 provinces and every senior corps advisor in the country; and he had kept notes on everything that they had said. These three men arrived at this meeting; and this was a meeting attended by the Attorney General and the works..Douglas Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon]...by this time the whole government.

KRAFT: The NSC?

FORRESTAL: Everything. Yes. The Kennedy NSC, which was much bigger really, composed of operating people rather than statutory people. I remember it was in the morning...a sunny morning...sun shining through.

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And President Kennedy turned to General Taylor and said, "Will you start". General Taylor said, "Well, General Krulak has just come back from a tour of Vietnam. He has talked to all these people and will give a report". General Krulak gave a report that basically was a rehash of all the statistics proving how well we were doing, supplemented by or corroborated by his tour of the provinces where he had asked everybody "Are these statistics correct?" And they said, "Yes Sir, they are." "How is the war going?" "We are doing fine." It took him twenty minutes to deliver this.

Then President Kennedy said, "Well, I understand that Mr. Phillips is here." Phillips, in the meantime, while he was listening to Krulak, had gotten quite agitated. The President said, "Mr. Phillips, would you tell us what your reports indicate. I understand you also get around." Phillips presented an appalling account. The strategic hamlet program had been grossly misrepresented. There were not as many hamlets as the government said there were. They were losing them right and left. The Viet Cong were knocking them off. The whole program was over-extended. The political difficulties in Saigon had begun to reach down down to the provincial administrations to the point where they were no longer effective. And the whole country was falling to pieces. Then Mendenhall sort of half corroborated what Phillips had said. President Kennedy looked at Krulak and Phillips and he said, "Gentlemen, I just have one question to ask. Are you two sure that you've both been to the same country?"

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This particular meeting produced very violent feelings on the part of everyone there. I think Secretary McNamara was quite angry that Phillips had been allowed to speak at all. And I think some of the civilians, Hilsman particularly, were quite angry that Krulak has been allowed to make the kind of presentation that he did on the very dubious statistical base that he had. So the thing broke up in a very tense atmosphere. But this simply is a reflection of the same kind of argument that was going on in Saigon. The government was completely divided. They didn't agree on the assessment. There were hard feelings. They went so far as to suggest people were inventing facts. McNamara's constant accusation against the civilians was that - Where are your statistics? All you are telling me are conclusions. You're not giving me any evidence. Where's the hard evidence? Match what Krulak gives me in the way of numbers and figures. The civilians answer was, "Mr. McNamara, you can't measure these things by statistics. Your statistics are phony. They have no basis at all, and in politics in any event such things cannot be measured by numbers." So that was the dilemma.

KRAFT: And it was against this background that the McNamara-Taylor Mission went out?

FORRESTAL: It was shortly thereafter that the President said, "I've heard enough. We're not going to be able to solve it here. I want McNamara and Taylor to go out and spend as much time as you need; go see what you want to see, but come back and tell me what the truth is." So we all went tearing out there.

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KRAFT: You went out?

FORRESTAL: Yes, we had a big bunch. The President wanted to make it a Defense mission essentially. He didn't want to have high-ranking State Department officers out there. So Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan], Harriman's assistant, came from State. I came from the White House. Bill Bundy, who had come back from leave by that time, McNamara, Max Taylor, Art Sylvester [Arthur Sylvester] and the various aides from Defense. It was a dreadful visit. It lasted one week. McNamara and Taylor spent virtually all their time hopping in a helicopter from one military headquarter to another. I went on a couple of the visits - not all of them, because I spent most of my time in Saigon trying to dig into the question of whether or not Diem could survive if we gave him overt backing.

One amusing thing. In good Pentagon form, General Krulak had written the team's report before we took off. He had large books in front of everybody on the plane, with the conclusions carefully spelled out, and all the statistics to back them up. We arrived in Saigon. Sullivan covered the diplomatic corps; and I spent most of my time with the CIA intelligence people and the French and business community trying to assess whether Diem and his regime had gone beyond the point of no return and to decide whether to go back and try to support it wholeheartedly or sit back and wait for the inevitable to happen. The disagreement between the civilians and the military were accentuated rather than solved by

the McNamara Mission. The only effect that it has was on McNamara himself, who began very tentatively and carefully (because he didn't want to insult the military in the process) to change his views. He didn't

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change them dramatically, but he came out with a quite fair estimate under the circumstances.. He said, "There's no doubt that this trouble has had an effect on the war. I can't assess how much; nor can I make predictions about the future. But it is problematical whether we can continue very much longer under these circumstances. There has to be a change." There were all sorts of disagreements on the plane coming back. Max Taylor had been getting from his Army people the same phony statistical story from the provinces. But on one occasion, he went down and saw one group of junior officers..very junior officers..in Can To. General Taylor asked on young major who was a provincial advisor how the war was going. The major said, "Lousy, General". And the General said, "What do you mean by that?" Whereupon the major began to tell him exactly what he meant. Very convincingly. This gave courage to all the rest of the officers in the room and all hell broke loose. There was a very pessimistic appraisal from the whole group. But this was the one time that this happened.

KRAFT: Was McNamara on hand for this?

FORRESTAL: Yes. They both were. I think this shook McNamara very much. When we came back in the plane, a report was written, which if you read, you wouldn't understand what the conclusions were because they were a mishmash of everything. But I think McNamara himself had gotten quite bearish about this whole thing. I'm sure he talked to the President directly and privately about this. Because it was shortly thereafter that the President made his speech about changes in policy and personnel.

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KRAFT: And wasn't there a formal statement by McNamara and Taylor saying that the war could be won, providing reforms were made. It was White House.

FORRESTAL: The White House release. Yes, that's the time they got into trouble about 1965. I never have understood what prompted them to set a date. At the NSC meeting where this came out a number of us suggested that this was the wrong thing to say. But McNamara felt you couldn't put out a completely negative report. You had to say something positive. That statement has always been a troublesome one.

KRAFT: Also about bringing back some troops, and perhaps bringing them all back by December?

FORRESTAL: A thousand. Yes. Bring back a thousand troops by December and perhaps bring them all back sometime in 1965.

KRAFT: Would it be fair to say that some people thought that this was the price that McNamara had to pay for getting Taylor on board at least a little bit for the necessity to make some changes.

FORRESTAL: Yes, I think so. You see, General Harkins, during this entire episode, was in the clouds - Olympian like - way above the floor. Harkins kept saying again and again - and he never has changed his view; even today he continues to say it - that everything is alright. Don't worry, we're way ahead of the game. There's no problem. We'll eventually win. Harkins had the feeling, I think, that if you're a general, and you have the troops out there in the field dying, you must be optimistic. This is the way you keep you morale. Well, Taylor was very much

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influenced by Harkins on this and felt he had to back him up. I think this was, as you say, his price.

I think that got us up to late September. October was a month of more coup plotting. I must say that one thing that has been very unclear in the press... We never did have any active involvement in the coup plotting business. What happened was that even before the McNamara visit occurred, all reports of coup plotting began to dry up. Nhu and his secret police began to become much more effective and they began cutting off intelligence sources.

Lodge, incidentally, throughout this whole episode was very much convinced that you had to have a change of government. It was fundamentally Lodge's theory that the United States had to engineer the removal of Nhu. He would have liked to have kept Diem, but he wanted, above all, to get rid of Nhu. And he was prepared to go to quite some lengths to do that. But so far as I knew he never really did because he never had a chance.

KRAFT:

FORRESTAL: We didn't have anything to do with the coup. I mean with the coup plotting, but we did things that were quite important. Lodge's theory was that we should bring pressure on Diem to change his ways. I think in a way he was quite right. We had tried very carefully in September to analyze what effect the cut-off of aid and various other measures would have on the political atmosphere.

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We were trying to devise measures which would bring pressure on Diem, not against Diem, but on him, to change. And the cut-off of commodity aid, which seemed the best thing to do because it affected the elite. .the merchants and the business community with whom Diem was deeply in league. Of course, all his money came from them. They were one and the same thing. We figured that if you could let this thing go long enough Diem would eventually have to bend, get rid of his brother, grant amnesty to some of the prisoners and start all over again.

KRAFT:

FORRESTAL:

But we never had a word about the coup which

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actually took place. We had low-level rumors of lots of coups, but we never had the slightest idea that the particular group of men who engineered this one were going to do it. We tried very hard to keep maps and charts of where the forces were and whose loyalties were to whom, but when the thing actually occurred, it turned out we were completely wrong. We didn't know... We had deeply misjudged the strength of the opposition to Diem in the army. November 1st came completely unexpectedly. Admiral Felt had visited Diem at 11 o'clock in the morning, gone to the airport with General Don [Tran Van Don], who was one of the coup leaders. And Don subsequently told me that he was looking at his watch all the time, knowing that if Admiral Felt didn't get off the ground by 2 o'clock things were going to be very difficult later. We were completely in the dark about this thing.

KRAFT: Now when the coup took place, there was no problem about accepting it was there?

FORRESTAL: Well, we didn't really have any choice. We first heard about 2 o'clock in the afternoon Saigon time... 2 o'clock in the morning our time. I came down to the Situation Room. The President was upstairs. I woke him up, of course. I called him right away and told him that we had a first report of a coup. We always had U.S. army officer advisors sitting in the Joint General Staff Headquarters, where the coup was being organized. He was given no inkling of what was

going on until the coup had started. But he stayed there throughout the entire thing.

KRAFT: An American officer?

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FORRESTAL: An American Army officer. He gave us reports every 20 minutes or so, as soon as the shooting started. It was the most extraordinary communication. We knew sometimes within 10 or 11 minutes, but never any longer than 20 minutes, what was going on in the City of Saigon. This man telephoned the Embassy, and the Embassy put it right on the wires. We got it in the White House Situation Room 10 or 11 minutes later. This was rare. Not like the Cuban episode where there was a seven hour delay in the transmission of messages.

KRAFT: At the end of the month, I believe, there was another McNamara-Taylor visit to Saigon to meet Harkins and Lodge. The end of November?

FORRESTAL: Yes.

KRAFT: Were you out on that?

FORRESTAL: No, I didn't go on that. I went later. I went in December. Just before the President's assassination. A dreadful time.

KRAFT: Oh, that's right.

FORRESTAL: There was a Honolulu Meeting on the 19th of November, I think. I went out to that with McNamara - Lodge came in this direction. And I saw the President just before going. It was the last time I saw him. He wanted to get a report from Lodge on how the new group was doing and to plot a course for what we could do to help them. By this time it had become clear that the civilians had been right. Things were in a very bad mess in the countryside, although the military tended to ascribe that to the coup. But in 22 days you don't go from white to black. Anyway, whatever the right or wrong of that is, the President

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wanted to get a report from McNamara. I think basically what he really wanted to do was to make sure that McNamara and Taylor were in touch with each other and understood what was happening. He also asked me to go to Cambodia, which by this time, was giving us trouble. Prince Sihanouk [Prince Norodom Sihanouk], who had threatened to "cut off", as he put it, to cut off American aid. The President was actually, in a way slightly sympathetic with Sihanouk's problem at this point. He sort of half admired the man and half condemned him. We had a long talk about that. That was the last time I saw the President.

We flew out to Honolulu the night of the 19th. I think I arrived on the 20th. Met all day on the 20th. Rusk was along on this one.

KRAFT: They were going to Tokyo from there?

FORRESTAL: They were going on to Tokyo. It wasn't much of a meeting. Those things hardly ever are. We had the usual report from Harkins that everything was fine and the usual report from Lodge. And this was his first report - oral report. A bit gloomy.

KRAFT: Harkins was still taking the position that everything was fine.

FORRESTAL: Oh yes, better than ever. Actually, what he said was "There will be a period of readjustment, but the fundamental theory is absolutely right, and we're going to get rid of the thousand men in December, and by 1965 everything will be hunkey-dorey". We had several other reports from the civilian people, which weren't very hopeful. Then Rusk went on to Tokyo, and McNamara, I think, came home. Harkins and I went back to Saigon.

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KRAFT: No, I think McNamara and Rusk were all on their way to Tokyo.

FORRESTAL: Yes, because it was a Cabinet meeting. And Lodge did not go back to Saigon. Lodge went back to Washington to report to President Kennedy. I went on to Saigon with General Harkins and arrived in Saigon on Friday night. On Saturday morning (I guess it was about 4 o'clock) we were woken up and told the President had been assassinated. Then I went on from there to Cambodia. I started to come home, but Mac Bundy called and said that he was sure that President Kennedy would have wanted me to go on. President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] had agreed that this was the thing to do, and so I was told not to come rushing home. That's about the end of it.

But there is one point that is worth mentioning here. A little footnote. In September, when McNamara and Taylor went out before the coup, they also tried to do a sampling of important opinion to try to find out whether a coup was going to take place. And one of the sadder elements of this whole story was the famous tennis game between General Taylor and General Minh. General Minh at the time was a senior military fellow in the Vietnamese Army, but he didn't have anything to do. The purpose of the tennis game was to have Taylor find out from Minh whether he was going to run a coup or not. And many of our calculations in the succeeding weeks were deeply affected by the fact that Minh promised Taylor that he wouldn't...that there wouldn't be any coup and there couldn't be.

KRAFT: This is the distance you had come from the August 24th to the September 24th? The signal was in effect off. And you were trying

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to persuade them the other way?

FORRESTAL: Exactly. So it was a sort of on-again-off-again thing. But this just demonstrates how really impossible it is for the United States to engineer coups in foreign countries. It just cannot be done. They do it themselves or not at all. But I think that's the end of that chapter. I think we might as well quit here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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