

**William Averell Harriman Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 06/06/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** William Averell Harriman  
**Interviewer:** Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.  
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**Biographical Note**

Harriman was the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, 1943 to 1946, and to the United Kingdom for a short while in 1946; the Secretary of Commerce from 1946 to 1948; the governor of New York, 1955 to 1959; Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs from 1961 to 1963; Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, 1963 to 1965; the chief American negotiator at the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty discussions in Moscow, 1963, and the Vietnam peace negotiations in Paris, 1968 and 1969; and an adviser to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy [JFK], and Lyndon B. Johnson. In this interview, Harriman discusses American opinion on negotiations in Laos; U.S. negotiations and objectives in Indonesia; American relations with Achmed Sukarno; friction between the State Department and the Pentagon over who should control the situation in Vietnam, civilians or the military; Ngo Dinh Diem and the military coup that overthrew him; problems with and for newspapermen in Vietnam; and his opinion on where the United States went wrong in Vietnam, among other issues.

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*A. Rowell Harriman*

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*Jan. 19<sup>th</sup> 1973*

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Third Oral History Interview

With

WILLIAM AVERELL HARRIMAN

June 6, 1965

By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SCHLESINGER: Averell, as I've been looking over the transcript for the last session, it seems to me that I did not ask you, in connection with the Laos negotiations, about the attitude of the Department of State toward the negotiations.

HARRIMAN: Well, the Department, of course, was fully cooperative in sending me the people I needed, and I think gave a good deal of attention to the telegrams and got them answered. I had a feeling, however, that they had not accepted the realities of the situation or the fact that the President [John F. Kennedy] was determined to have a peaceful neutralization of Laos. They were still taking positions which were unattainable unless we were ready to support them by military action. For example, they still pursued the idea that Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] could dominate, or have more than a third share of control of the new government which was to come out. They were unwilling to accept Souvanna Phouma as I had done, namely as the one

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man who could develop a neutral government and a government in which we had a right to support. And therefore, they, unfortunately, by their recommendations to the Ambassador in talking to Phoumi, encouraged him to take a tougher stand in connection with the organization of the new government and set us back, I'm satisfied, for three or four months,

and made it much more difficult to eventually get a settlement. In fact, we had to put some sanctions on Phoumi in order to get out of his mind the idea that if he held out that we would support him militarily. Now this, I think, certain members of the Department have got to take some share of the blame, but...

SCHLESINGER: This is in the autumn of...

HARRIMAN: This is in the autumn, the late summer, and in the autumn and early winter of 1961. I know we would have had a much better chance to get a truly neutral government if we had been willing to accept Souvanna as the neutral whom we could count on, put such ministries as the Interior and Defense on to him, and then keep the Pathet Lao out of some of the more sensitive positions. I'm satisfied we could have achieved this if Phoumi had agreed. Now possibly Phoumi wouldn't have agreed even if the Department had twisted his arm earlier, or put pressure on him earlier, but in any event he waited so long that we had to compromise on this triumvirate arrangement which was not very satisfactory, a triumvirate control, and therefore I think the situation was very much weakened. Just who this was or how it came about,

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I don't know. I think it came from the fact that the people did not—it was ingrained in the people that worked on Laos over the years, ingrained on them that Souvanna Phouma was not to be trusted and that we could put our faith in Phoumi. Well, Phoumi has proved to be no good. Souvanna Phouma has proved to be a thoroughly reliable neutral, a neutralist determined to preserve his country against communist takeover, and as you've perhaps seen lately, Phoumi has attempted a revolt, believing still, I think, that the United States would have to come to his aid if he were able to regain control or regain a dominant position.

SCHLESINGER: This opposition to Souvanna was in part an opposition to the idea of the neutralists' solution to—I mean do these people, you suppose, really think that it could be kept as a bulwark of strength?

HARRIMAN: I don't know whether it could be done or not. It's very hard to say. Unfortunately, the personalities involved I'm not fully familiar with, but when you get such ingrained concepts as existed in the previous Administration that—I think Foster Dulles [John Foster Dulles] himself said that Laos should be made a bastion of Western strength. Those ideas were ingrained in certain people and ingrained in the idea that we had to maintain a rightwing, or a pro-Western oriented, government was our basic policy and we would be beaten unless we achieved that. I think that's very hard

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to change—the ideas of some people on the ground. Now I don't want to give any indication that on the topside there was any disagreement, on the topside with the CIA or the Pentagon,

but through the organizations of all of them, I think there was still a hankering for achieving an objective which just simply couldn't be achieved, namely the establishment of a pro-Western control of the government with Phoumi as the man we could trust. Well, it's been proved that we can't trust Phoumi. He's looking after his own interests, and we can trust Souvanna.

SCHLESINGER: Both Thailand and South Vietnam were resistant to the settlement in Laos?

HARRIMAN: Yes, very much so, and I don't doubt that some of our people were influenced by the desire to keep both Thailand and South Vietnam buttered up. They, of course, wanted to see a pro-West government. They were afraid of neutralists and they had reason to be. But that wasn't our policy. The President was not prepared to put in a large American expeditionary force and fight it out in Laos. The Chiefs [Joint Chiefs of Staff] didn't believe that was the right place to fight it out, and I thought, of course, the agreement was right.

In any event, we finally did come to a settlement, but it wasn't anything like as good a settlement as we could have made or as—the settlement has created a lot of difficulties by establishing this tripartite control which wouldn't have

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been necessary if the agreements had been reached earlier in the game.

SCHLESINGER: Chronologically, when you became assistant secretary, you got Indonesia, and the West New Guinea thing must have been one of your first items.

HARRIMAN: Yes. That was finally worked out. They had full support of all hands in the Department. In that, we didn't have full support from some of our friends and allies. It was rather hard to get the Dutch to recognize, particularly the Minister of Foreign Affairs [Joseph Luns] who still hoped to achieve some sort of a settlement that would give control, some kind of control, to the Dutch. Now the whole fallacy of the Dutch situation was they weren't ready to fight and the Indonesians were, and our position was that you'd better negotiate out a settlement if you're not ready to fight. We're not going to fight your battles for you, not going to go into a major war there. The territory involved was not a very desirable one. On the other hand of course, the Australians were unhappy with the idea of having Indonesia as their neighbor on the other half of Guinea, and therefore they were not too helpful or anxious for settlement. It was finally worked out, as you know, by appointment of Ambassador Bunker [Ellsworth Bunker] to use his good offices, and agreement was finally reached which was a face-saver for all concerned. And I think it's fair to say that some of our people in the EUR

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[Bureau of European Affairs] thought we should have been firmer in supporting the Dutch position, and there again a delay occurred which possibly made it more difficult to come to an agreement and made the terms somewhat less satisfactory from the Dutch standpoint. You know, when you get into that kind of a negotiation, you have to do it rapidly or else the side that realizes they're winning, namely, in this case, Indonesia, raises the ante the longer the delay occurs. Here again, I feel that if we'd had the fullest understanding of the ultimate objectives, we would have been able to do a little bit better for the Dutch, but in the long run I don't think it made very much difference.

There was one meeting between Secretary of State Rusk [Dean Rusk] and Dutch Foreign Minister Luns in Greece, in which Dean Rusk, who wasn't familiar with all of the details and still had hopes we could do a little better for the Dutch and still felt that our relations with the Dutch were more important than the settlement, came to some understanding with Luns that we would support them in certain positions, and that made the Dutch a little bit more difficult to deal with. That meeting in Greece was an unfortunate one. You know, the trouble is when you're Secretary of State, unless you know all the facts, it's rather hard to stand a skillful negotiator as Luns was, and Dean Rusk was anxious to maintain our NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] alliance. He looked upon that as being more

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important than the settlement in Indonesia.

SCHLESINGER: What would a resolution more favorable to the Dutch have been?

HARRIMAN: It wouldn't have been very much more, I'm frank to say. It could have been a little more definite agreement about the plebiscite. I think we could have had a little better agreement on the part of Indonesia that they would spend more effort in modernizing and helping improve the social-economic life of the West Irian people. I thought that was the greatest weakness in our negotiations, but the Dutch were more interested in the face-saving device of a plebiscite than they were of getting a commitment from Indonesia on the future. That's perhaps quite natural. But I thought we ought to have insisted more on Indonesia's putting some effort into improving the social-economic conditions of the people. You know they are unfortunately very backward. The Dutch did give some money—I think ten million dollars or so—to help in the modernization of their life, but I'm afraid the Indonesian government has failed to do anything. In fact, the agreement did not provide for a definite program which I thought was very desirable. Now there may be a plebiscite someday, but if there is a plebiscite, it will be so well stacked that it will be meaningless.

SCHLESINGER: How would you describe our objectives in Indonesia?

HARRIMAN: I think our objective was to quiet a situation which was causing a great deal of trouble and to prevent a military



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action on the part of Indonesia. They were already starting guerrilla activity, and they could undoubtedly have made life untenable for the Dutch, and it could have developed into a very difficult situation in which the Dutch would be spending a lot of money and a lot of people would be killed, and it would have led to a conflict in which there could only be one end, namely the withdrawal of the Dutch. We were trying to help the Dutch save their own position, save their own self-respect, and save them from a war and an additional expenditure of money. I'm frank to say that some of the Dutch, including our very good Ambassador here, Herman van Roijen [J. Herman van Roijen], told me after it was all over that we had done the Dutch a very great service in insisting on their withdrawing and that there was no better way to withdraw than the one that was worked out. So that in a sense we were trying to save the Dutch from themselves, but the objective was very clear; it was to prevent fighting, to prevent the loss of human life, and prevent a situation in which conflicts would grow.

The whole trouble with this situation, as you remember, was that the Dutch had agreed to settle it within a year after the independence was granted. Instead of that they prolonged and prolonged the issue. I think they first thought they were going to find some oil on the island; in addition to which they felt, I believe, or some of them did, that this could be

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a stepping-off place for them to get back into Indonesia. They thought the Indonesians would not be able to manage their own affairs. They had very little regard for the Indonesians' ability to manage their affairs, and therefore, West Irian or West New Guinea was a place from which they could come back in. I don't think there was any doubt that many of them felt that. This was one of the things the Indonesians realized; and although the claim for Indonesian sovereignty over West New Guinea was rather tenuous—it did have some basis, but it was tenuous—from a practical standpoint they looked upon it as a—and I'm taking their side at this moment. I'm not sure that I would be in an argument. But they did have a feeling that as long as the Dutch were in West New Guinea they would be a threat to attempt to return. Now of course, as you know, there was an uprising in Sumatra which, I am told, we assisted. Undoubtedly the Dutch would have been delighted to have had a split up of the Indonesian Republic, and their presence there gave them this opportunity to move in. I was very hopeful that—perhaps if we had been able to work out an agreement a little bit earlier, I was very hopeful that we could get some specific agreement by the Indonesians to bring the Dutch management back, to bring their control of their properties back, and to get the Dutch to help in improving conditions in Indonesia. Well, that was lost out on because there was such bitterness in these negotiations.

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The Dutch are, however, or did, however, begin to get back some period later. I'm afraid under existing circumstances there is very little hope for any foreigner to stay in Indonesia.

They've become so completely nationalistic, and Sukarno [Achmed Sukarno] is moving too closely to the PKI [Partai Komunis Indonesia], Communist Party.

SCHLESINGER: Was there also the thought, in connection with West New Guinea, that by taking a position sympathetic to the Indonesians we might halt or slow up their drift into the communist bloc?

HARRIMAN: Yes. Well, we thought that if we could stop this fighting we could use our influence to get Sukarno to spend more attention to the development of his country rather than his expansionist ideas. There was, of course, the problem with Malaysia. We wanted to settle this in order to be able to attempt to bring Sukarno more in line with the—improve relations with all the West, not just the Dutch.

SCHLESINGER: Did you talk to Sukarno in the course of this...

HARRIMAN: No, I never met Sukarno. Bunker, of course, did. Bunker was very helpful in this whole situation. He handled it with great skill, and he took a situation in which there appeared to be no basis for agreement and brought it around step by step.

SCHLESINGER: Did President Kennedy ever talk to you about Sukarno or about Indonesia?

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HARRIMAN: Yes, we talked of Sukarno a number of times. I don't recall particularly in regard to the West Irian solution, but I talked to him frequently about trying to maintain relations with Sukarno. He recognized that his personal relations with Sukarno were important and was ready to send him messages when they would be useful. In fact, he had assured Sukarno that he would pay a visit to the East, visiting a few countries including Indonesia. I think he agreed to spend two or three days there, or at least a couple of days there, which Sukarno would have prized very much. It was the hope of improved personal relations with President Kennedy that kept Sukarno from time to time from going off the deep end. And we used it consciously, or at least I did, used it consciously, as one of the means to keep Sukarno from going overboard both on his attacks, concentration on Malaysia, and in other ways interfering with his relations with the West.

SCHLESINGER: Why do you suppose he cared so much about better relations with Kennedy?

HARRIMAN: Well, I think that President Sukarno—of course I don't know him so it's only secondhanded, but I think he was very proud, considered himself one of the great personalities of the world, and he recognized in President Kennedy a great leader, not only as President of the United States but President Kennedy was

making a very deep impression on all the underdeveloped countries, and he wanted to be known to be a

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friends of his, confidante, and so forth. This was a matter of personal pride, I think, plus the fact that he hoped thereby, undoubtedly, to get some support in some of the things he wanted to do, but basically I think it was a matter of pride and prestige. He wanted to become the great man—he wants to become the great man of Asia and have Indonesia one of the great world powers.

Now, of course, during that period we took the offensive, and I think the policies we pursued were clearly correct. After years of negotiation, we finally got the oil concession contract agreed to which was a big step forward. We were able to bring together Macapagal [Diosdado Macapagal] and Tunku [Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj] and Sukarno. They almost came to agreements. I'm afraid that the British upset the applecart on several occasions. Whether it would have made any difference in the long run, I can't guarantee, but I'm satisfied that if Duncan Sandys [Duncan Edwin Sandys] had been more cooperative, we might well have held the situation together for a longer period of time, and it might well have not taken the downward spin which it has taken in the last year.

Some people have said we were just trying to hang on. We weren't. We were making progress in settling some of our differences and in bringing together the three countries: the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. They talked about

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organizing what was known as Maphilindo, an organization of states in the area and it wasn't all pipe dream. I think there was some reason to believe that Sukarno might well have followed that line. This whole thing was upset after I got out of it by failure to recognize that we could not associate ourselves directly with Malaysia. We had to remain, at least publicly, somewhat aloof. There was no doubt that Sukarno recognized that if he were to attack overtly Malaysia, he was told very directly of our ANZUS [Australia-New Zealand-United States Treaty] obligations and he knew the strength of the Seventh Fleet, but we did this all privately. We didn't in any sense publicly make statements. Well, unfortunately, after I got out of it, the British influence came to the fore. They were quite opposed to what I was doing. I couldn't convince them. They accepted it, yes, but they thought it would be very fine if we could knock Sukarno over the head and tell him that the Seventh Fleet would be with them—that that would end Sukarno's aggression. Well, I just disagreed. I thought it would increase it and the way to finally come to an understanding was to do it through negotiation. But in any event, unfortunately, with the influence again of the British in the EUR and the desirability of getting the British to take a greater role in Vietnam, Tunku was invited to come to the United States, and President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], who was not, of course, familiar with all these

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details, made statements, public statements, which tied us quite closely to Malaysia and then, in answer to a request for military assistance, we sold them \$4,000,000 worth of military equipment which was not at all necessary.

Now the net result of this was—of course, the British have taken a greater interest in Vietnam. We have that benefit, but as against that we were immediately classified with the British as number one enemy of Sukarno, and our relations have taken a tailspin. And he has gone more and more to the PKI. The noncommunist parties have been squeezed out. The army's influence, which we'd always hoped would offset the PKI, has been reduced, and it has led to greater efforts in the confrontation by Sukarno of Malaysia. Now fortunately, the British have been very skillful with their military assistance and have been able to knock out, through good intelligence and good action, have been able to knock out the infiltrators into Malaya itself and Singapore, also in North Borneo, so that militarily they have done very well. Sukarno has done very badly, but from our standpoint, our properties now are being confiscated and although they haven't taken complete action about the oil fields, it looks as if that's going to be the next step, and the general Western influence with Sukarno is gone, and he has withdrawn from the United Nations. Just what his plans are I don't know, but I had hoped of course that the policies we conducted

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with President Kennedy would be successful in holding the line until such time as Sukarno passed on and some more reasonable government could take over. You see, he has let his economy go completely to pieces. The Soviets have continued to help him, but just how he's going to get out of his financial problems, I don't know. I think it will generally lead to a lower standard of living for the Indonesian people, and certainly it gives a much greater chance of the communist takeover. One has to remember that Indonesia has a hundred million people, is very rich in minerals and agricultural potentialities. It lies across the whole of Asia from Indochina to Australia. Strategically, it is in a very important place, and it is a very important area of the world. We've let it slip out of any control on our part. Just what will happen I don't know, but I do think that this was a change in policy after I went out of FE [Far East] which was most unfortunate.

Again, it's the influence of Europe, one country or another of Europe, on our policies towards the underdeveloped countries, the lack of realization that the battle against the communists is in the underdeveloped countries and it's not in Europe. We won the battle for Europe against communists back in 1947 to 1950. The great struggle of the world is in the communist struggle. We can afford to go through some difficulties with de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle]. We

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can afford to have some difficulties within the free world, but we have to win the struggle against the outward thrust of communism, and as we see, the toughest situation we have to deal with is South Vietnam and...

SCHLESINGER: When did your involvement begin there?

HARRIMAN: My involvement?

SCHLESINGER: In Vietnam.

HARRIMAN: Well, I've never had too much involvement in Vietnam because it was always controlled by a special committee which reported to the Secretary, but when I was in FE, as head of FE, I did exercise a certain amount of influence and I did have some influence on some of the decisions that were made. I was very close to Roger Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.], and he consulted me from period to period. I've had very little to do with Vietnam since Bill Bundy [William P. Bundy] has gone in. He reports direct to the Secretary and doesn't consult me which is his privilege.

Of course, when I was Undersecretary when President Kennedy was President, I was known to have had a connection with Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and also with President Kennedy, so some attention was paid to my opinions of things. But since that time there's been less and less attempt to find out what I thought. It's only when I have interjected myself in a situation that my advice has been listened to. A perfectly cordial relationship, but not one whose advice

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has been sought.

Now I'm not suggesting that I could have done any better with Vietnam. I don't think I could have. I think, by that time, we were up against a very, very tough situation, and the inability to find a stable government made it very difficult to carry on the kinds of social-economic programs which were necessary to save the South Vietnamese from communist infiltration—Vietcong infiltration. So I'm not saying this as a matter of complaint; I'm saying it as a matter of historic fact.

I thought myself that Roger Hilsman had some very sound points of view. He wanted to emphasize the social-economic side parallel with the military. But unfortunately he was a little too blunt in dealing with the military which was quite unfortunate, and got himself at loggerheads with the Pentagon. I think, myself, that one of the major difficulties that existed in South Vietnam was the fact that in the very beginning Dean Rusk turned over the major responsibility for Vietnam to Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara]. That was a conscious decision. I think he thought that things were going to be difficult and it would be easier to divest himself of that responsibility. He also felt that it would make the Pentagon have a greater feeling of responsibility,

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and therefore, would do a better job.

In my view, that was a mistake, because from the very beginning we didn't take fully into account the kind of political developments, the kind of economic developments and social developments which were necessary, which would have been more possible in the early days than they are now. I don't want to, in any way, be critical of Bob McNamara. He's

taken hold of it with the greatest of energy and has taken responsibility, but it's hard to point now, if you say, "Averell, tell me just what we ought to have done." It's impossible to retrace those steps, but I thought we could have brought more pressure on Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] in getting more progress on political, social and economic fronts. But this is a matter of opinion. I can't prove it. But I think the basic question here is one of fundamental government organization. In this kind of a situation the State Department should, in my judgment, remain in the senior. It should be the one to basically make the decisions and should not turn its responsibilities as the senior government agency in foreign affairs over to the Pentagon.

SCHLESINGER: I suppose this began with the Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] mission?

HARRIMAN: This began with the first Taylor mission, and, you know, Taylor. Rostow [Walt W. Rostow], and so forth—they came

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back. I don't know that President Kennedy realized this at all. I don't know. But you might find out from someone else. I understood it because Dean Rusk told me so himself. I suggested we take more effective positions on several occasions. I may or may not have been right. He said, "No, I'm going to leave it to the Pentagon."

SCHLESINGER: The Secretary quite consciously gave this to the Pentagon?

HARRIMAN: I think that the Secretary quite consciously—surrendered, perhaps, wouldn't be the right word to use—decided to give to McNamara the leading role and that the State Department would play second fiddle. I just didn't agree that was the right policy. I didn't agree that the State Department could divest itself of the responsibility, that it would come back to the State Department sooner or later, that anyway we were working for the President and it was a question of final result. And I don't think you can operate a situation of this kind from the Pentagon. The soldiers are trained, and rightly so, to look at matters from a military standpoint. This goes back to my experiences during the war. You remember General Marshall [George C. Marshall] and Admiral King [Ernest Joseph King] refused to get involved in political decisions and Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] made those political decisions. He always kept control, so I've been brought up in the school of civilian control of the military, and I think it's very unfortunate that a principle of military center of control of

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any operation of this kind should be accepted. And I think this precedent is a bad one.

SCHLESINGER: What was Nolting's [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] role?

HARRIMAN: Well, I never thought a great deal of Nolting. He was captivated by Diem,

and he wouldn't bring the pressure—or at least I didn't think he did bring enough pressure—on him to get the kind of changes in his policy which were necessary. Nhu, of course, and Madame Nhu [Tran Le Xuan] were the great political difficulties. He was losing control. The Buddhists were becoming more and more disaffected, and it looked as if in May, 1963, that Diem was headed for the skids.

Nolting left about that time and left it to his DCM [Deputy Chief of Missions], Trueheart [William C. Trueheart], wasn't it? I thought Trueheart took a much more forthright position, and I thought he did very well. It was very unfair of Nolting—I thought one of the things against his record is that he gave Trueheart a first-class rating, and then when he got back and he found Trueheart was taking some positions which were more vigorous, in trying to compel Diem to take some action, he switched on him and put in the record that Trueheart had been disloyal to him. The record is a very bad one. I mean it's very bad thing for a man to do that. He claims—I told Nolting that I didn't think he ought to leave that, he ought to wait until the end. But he had personal reasons for doing it, which was his right and privilege to do, but then,

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having dropped out, he had no business to come back in.

Since that time, he claims that mistakes were made and that if his policies had been pursued there would have been—and I think he took that position during the campaign. I'm not sure that he came out for Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater], but I know that he did make a number of speeches against the policies. In any event, I don't think he's a man that I'd give full marks for loyalty, number one, or judgment, number two.

SCHLESINGER: Did you visit Saigon?

HARRIMAN: I visited Saigon several times. I've forgotten just which the dates were. I can get them for you. I had contact through Mike Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal]. We had a very good team when Mike was in the White House because we were in hourly contact on all these matters which relate to the Far East, including Vietnam, and I found in dealing with foreign affairs that you've got to deal with them on an hourly basis. You can't wait until things break, and this idea of having the seventh floor as a fire department isn't the way I think foreign affairs can best be conducted. You've got to have a fire prevention. That should have the highest priority. This last year President Johnson gave me Africa to look after, since I am not consulted on Vietnam and we were able to change the whole Congo situation around from an appalling, dangerous position to one now that's almost too good to be true. And other matters have gone better.

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Well, it wasn't just me that was involved, but in the first place we worked very closely with the Belgians, we worked with the British, we got international cooperation, including some of the African countries. But it wasn't what I did. It was what I stimulated other people to do that really is the thing which—and then support them when things come

up. But you can't come into situations just once every few months and make a decision. You've got to live with them hourly. Literally, hourly. When I say hourly, I mean a couple times a day Mike and I would be talking about things with Roger Hilsman or whoever else was involved or the office director. Then, of course, he would see that Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and the President were well informed, and it kept everyone informed currently what was going on, and I think we made good decisions.

SCHLESINGER: What was Diem like?

HARRIMAN: What was he like?

SCHLESINGER: You met.... What was that like?

HARRIMAN: Well, he was a man.... Of course, he had an attitude that belonged to another political age. People called him a mandarin, namely, that the people should respect their government and that it was their obligation to respect him. Now he had a lot of courage, a lot of determination. It was unfortunate that he was surrounded by his family who were a very bad influence, and he lost ground with the people. In the early

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days, you know, when he first started in, nobody thought he could survive, but he had lots of courage and determination and did get control. And there's no doubt that he had made a great deal of progress. He was very stubborn; he wouldn't move. You know when Durbrow [Elbridge Durbrow] was there, on a number of occasions he tried his best to strong-arm him by vigorous positions, but he was very stubborn. Now sometimes stubbornness is good, but his greatest weakness was that he would not get rid of Nhu and other members of the family. He didn't recognize their difficulty. Of course, he had this problem. There were a couple of attempts on his life, and his family were the one people that he could thoroughly trust, and when a man is in that position it is rather hard to get him to agree to get rid of the people who were most loyal to him.

I remember the same thing was true when I saw Chiang Kai-Shek in January, 1946. He pointed out that the people that I complained of were the people that he could trust. These were the warlords and the corrupt group that were around him. When a man gets into a position of personal dictatorship, why, he becomes a servant; really, he becomes a captive of his entourage.

SCHLESINGER: Was it possible to have an exchange of ideas with Diem?

HARRIMAN: Oh yes. I didn't see this. I was told that he would talk at you. I didn't find that. I found that it was possible to exchange ideas with him consistently. He talked for hours, of course, but I had no problem with talking to him. I think you had to sometimes interrupt him and interpose. I know that when



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Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] came, the first time he was there—after Lemnitzer arrived Diem did all the talking, and Lem didn't break in. He was a little overly polite. [Laughter] Well, I've long since ended that business, but I think the people who say Diem talked too much were those who didn't have the savoir faire to simply break in and when you disagreed, say you did disagree or change the direction of the conversation to one that you wanted to. But he was difficult to get along with, and I'm not saying that Nolting could have achieved anything. What I objected to was Nolting's accepting him hook, line, and sinker, and not recognizing that we were getting into a position that would cause a great deal of difficulty. As you look back on it, Diem was better than the chaotic condition which followed him, but I'm still—a number have convinced me that from May on the skids were under Diem and that he couldn't have survived. And those people's opinions I rely upon—a very wide group—believe that if Diem hadn't been in a coup the first of November when it occurred, it would have occurred within a month or two or three later, under even more adverse circumstances.

The fact that they've had so much difficulty in Vietnam to achieve some sort of stable government shows that South Vietnam is just like the Dominican Republic. Wherever you've had a strong dictatorship, it's impossible to develop democratic parties. Let's hope that something more stable can now come

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out of situations. It's very curious that this struggle between the Catholics and the Buddhist leaders has been entirely between them. They both are anticommunist. Neither one wants to give in, and yet they don't seem to be willing, either one, to give in sufficiently on their conflict with each other to arrive at a compromise situation which will let the full energies of the government be turned against the Vietcong.

SCHLESINGER: How do you account for the fact of this wave of optimism about Vietnam in late '62 and early '63, when Harkins [Paul D. Harkins] and...

HARRIMAN: Well, when was the time that McNamara came back and said that we could be out in—that was in September...

SCHLESINGER: That was at the end of '63.

HARRIMAN: That was in September '63, wasn't it? Well, Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan] was on that trip—you know he was working for me then, one of my assistants, and I sent him on the trip. He wouldn't sign the report, and it wasn't in the report. But when they got to the White House, there was a desire to have good news come out, and McNamara said he'll tell the President [Kennedy] that he and Taylor agreed that conditions were moving in such a way that by the following year, wasn't it, they could reduce very materially the number of American troops there. Bill Sullivan

wasn't taken in, and therefore I wasn't taken in. We were in complete tune with each other as to what the situation was.

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My feeling is this was the trouble with the military control. The military are trained when they are in a battle to make the best face of what they're up against—if they're in a tough situation, to show always the best of it. That's part of their training. That's the way to create morale. That's the way to create the kind of impetus. And they were taken in by their own statements.

Now the civilians weren't taken in. At least I wasn't. Bill Sullivan wasn't. Mike Forrestal wasn't. Roger Hilsman wasn't. And I would say this clearly shows the blunder of Dean Rusk surrendering the State Department leadership. It never would have happened if the State Department had had control, because we would never let this thing come out. Sullivan wouldn't sign it. I wouldn't have agreed to it. But when it came to this situation, the Secretary of State went along without finding out how his own people felt about it. Or if he had found out how we felt about it, he would have said this was their responsibility.

Now I think you've put your finger on the clearest indication of the fallacy of having the military deal with a very involved political situation. They were involved in the numbers racket. Nhu persuaded them that they could establish these fortified hamlets and that there were x number of them that had been built, and that was about half of the number of the hamlets in the country, I think, or more than half. But

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I was told—I didn't hear from anybody else—I was told by the same sources, both the Australian adviser and the British adviser, Thompson [Robert K. G. Thompson], that these would crumble. I remember very clearly one of them explaining that these hamlets were being expanded down roads and down canals, leaving between areas in which the Vietcong could operate, and at a certain stage they would cut the finger off at the base and the hamlets would rot. Now that's exactly what happened.

The clear-and-hold conception which Roger Hilsman was fighting for was to clear an area completely and hold it. Clear it and hold it, so that the Vietcong could not get in behind. And that was the fallacy of it. The figures showed—statistics showed that very real progress was being made, but on the very, very weak foundation. And this was something we knew; it wasn't something we were guessing about. I didn't have any secret information. It was misjudging the information that was available.

SCHLESINGER: How did Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.] get into the picture?

HARRIMAN: I think Dean Rusk proposed it. I'm not quite sure. I did not oppose it. I didn't suggest it. Lodge originally came to me and said that he was very much interested in Vietnam, that he was a reserve general. He wanted to maintain his position, and that meant every year he had to spend three weeks or so or a month—I've forgotten what it is—in the

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service. The year before in '62 he had spent that period in the Pentagon studying Vietnam, and that spring he came to me and said, "Could I go out there and do something?" I was all for it because I felt Lodge could get a civilian point of view. He spoke French well, and he would be able to—he had a political sense. So I recommended it to the Secretary, to Dean Rusk, and next thing I heard was he'd proposed him as the Ambassador after talking to him about it. Now I didn't oppose it, and I think Lodge had some values, because he did take control. He was quite an independent fellow, as you know, and took action by himself. He had very little contact with Diem. He didn't like Diem, and relations between him and Diem broke down, and he was the beginning of what I think people say was our bringing Diem down. That isn't true. I don't think Diem was bringing himself down, but I think perhaps it did create a situation in which those who were opposed to him acted somewhat sooner than they otherwise would have.

Now Lodge dealt with Diem, but wouldn't seek him out. Diem had to call upon him. It would be interesting to talk to Lodge about this. I hope you get a chance. I thought that Lodge, whether he was wise or unwise, was quite dedicated about the work he did. He has been very loyal in his support of what was done in the interval. He hasn't blamed anybody else. And whether he was right or whether he was wrong, in this particular aspect of his political life, I think he should

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be commended for his spirit that he put into it and his loyalties. He didn't do a "Nolting" in other words, and he has behaved entirely correctly.

SCHLESINGER: What about those events in August '63 when there was a possibility of a military coup?

HARRIMAN: They came into September more, didn't they? There was talk all through August and September.

SCHLESINGER: There was that famous telegram.

HARRIMAN: Yes, that famous telegram was drafted by—I think approved by everybody, approved by the Pentagon. I don't recall just what the telegram said, but I remember George Ball [George W. Ball] approved it. The Secretary was away. I know that the highest in the Pentagon approved it. Bob McNamara was away—it must have been Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric]—so that this was not an unauthorized event. I think it indicated that we were not to take a position opposing a coup, that we'd let nature take its course. Wasn't that it?

SCHLESINGER: I guess the generals had come to Lodge and asked for a feeling of our attitude, and I think we said in effect that Diem should be given ample

opportunity to get rid of Nhu. But if he doesn't and then the generals throw him out, that we wouldn't take part in this, but we would deal with an interim regime.

HARRIMAN: That's right. I remember that well. I remember talking it over with Roger now that you recall it, and took it out to

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George Ball, both of us. And we talked to George Ball—he was playing golf. We sat down, and Alec Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] was there, and we talked the thing over. And Ros Gilpatric—either he got hold of Ros, or Ros had already approved it—I think it was Ros. Anyway, it had all the approvals. George went along with it. And I don't think there was anything wrong with that telegram. Whether it was executed as wisely as it might have been, I don't know. Whether enough pressure was put by Lodge on Diem to get rid of Nhu and so forth, I just don't recall. I would have to go over the record. But the Secretary didn't support his own people in that, and McNamara didn't agree with it. Taylor didn't agree with it.

SCHLESINGER: And that was followed in September by a series of meetings, wasn't it, at the White House?

HARRIMAN: I don't think I was called in. I'm not sure. I don't think I was called in.

SCHLESINGER: I think you were.

HARRIMAN: Was I?

SCHLESINGER: Wasn't it the parody of that that Jim Thomson [James C. Thomson, Jr.] wrote about?

HARRIMAN: I've got to look over my calendar. A lot of things were going on. The whole question of Hilsman was pushed through, and reluctantly I gave up Bill Sullivan, my assistant. You know the idea that the way to deal with it is to get somebody's assistant rather than the man himself doesn't make

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very much sense. Bill and I were working closely together, and Bill was carrying out the points of view that I thought—he was a very able fellow. But he was much less effective after he was taken away from me than if we were teamed together. He was made head of the task force, or whatever it was called—the committee.

And then they bounced Roger unceremoniously for doing things that he only—Roger's real sin was that he had lost the confidence of the Pentagon, and the Pentagon was very much annoyed with him. I think it was largely his manner. He was very brusque, you know. I remember one meeting when Lemnitzer was briefing the President on something that

was going on in Vietnam, and he said, “That isn’t it—this is really what’s happening though.” It’s just one of those things you don’t do. But it wasn’t a question of lack of sincerity on his part, or his being wrong. His manner was too brusque. I don’t know why this was it. He just wasn’t—he didn’t have good table manners. Of course he was fighting this military domination of the situation so that I guess he got rather edgy. And he knew that the statements being made that everything was going to be fine in six months or a year—he just knew they weren’t true; and when a man realizes that and is concerned over it, he’s apt to lose his sensitivity, particularly as he was a thoroughly loyal fellow.

SCHLESINGER: The coup which finally overthrew Diem took everyone by surprise here?

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HARRIMAN: No, I don’t think so. I think everybody knew. At least I thought there was going to be a coup somewhat earlier. It was rumored. Of course, it was a great shock to everybody that they were killed. I think that was one of those accidents that happened, probably because Nhu insulted the...

SCHLESINGER: ...guards.

HARRIMAN: ...junior officer. I think he probably told him if he didn’t let him out that he would see that he was shot. Anyway, it was too bad. But I think it is fair to say that no one foresaw the kind of instability that would take place afterwards. John McCone [John A. McCone] feels that we could have prevented Diem’s overthrow. I don’t think we could have. Now it is true at the end there Lodge did not try to stop it. You would have to try to stop it. There was nothing we did that I know of that encouraged the coup. It was the question of whether we would use our efforts to stop it. And I think we probably could have stopped it for a time. Many people who were much more involved in the details that I was feel that it could have only been held over for not over two or three months.

SCHLESINGER: Wasn’t it in a sense that the dam was breaking and unless Diem was willing to become rational, he was through? In fact, he became more irrational.

HARRIMAN: Well, when I went into FE I was convinced that we had to get rid of Nhu or else the Diem regime would be gravely in danger.

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When I got into it I found that Nhu was the spark plug of this strategic hamlet concept and was doing a great deal, and I was told Diem could not get along without him and so I didn’t start any great major campaign against him. I’d seen Nhu. I spent four hours with him in Geneva. He came to lunch. He was a man that was—and then I saw him in Paris—he was a man that I would have no confidence in whatsoever. Both either in his

judgment—he was conceited. I remember he told me he'd just been down to Morocco and that he was going to settle, mediate, the differences between Morocco and Algeria. [Laughter] Now you didn't have to be with him very long to realize that this man was not well balanced. He had illusions of grandeur—I don't mean to say he was off his rocker, but he wasn't a rational administrator.

SCHLESINGER: Did you have any reaction to the great fight about the newspapermen in Saigon?

HARRIMAN: I had a great deal of sympathy for the Americans on that side. The better quality newspapermen who were there, the headline correspondents, quit because there wasn't enough news to come out to put their dispatches on the front page, and if you are a headline correspondent and you don't keep your name in print enough on the front page and it gets off to the third or fourth and sixth and eighth, then you lose your attraction. So I think it's fair to say that by the time I got there there was rather a less skilled group of people. I'm not condemning

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them all, but there were some that we quite unfortunate. *Newsweek* had a Frenchman, didn't they?

SCHLESINGER: Francois Sully.

HARRIMAN: Yes, Sully, who I thought was not a very admirable character. Now our problem was that the news was being given out by Diem's government and Diem had the dictator's ideas of giving out what was good for them. And so then some of the stuff leaked through some of our people. You can't prevent, when you have that number of soldiers there going out in the evening and talking about things, airmen or otherwise, that they would leak stuff and then there would be distorted stories. We didn't establish any censorship, but nothing you could do with Diem could force him to have good relations with American newspapermen. That just wasn't his way of doing business, so that I have sympathy for our people in being able to deal with the press. I don't think there was any answer to it. There was no satisfactory answer to it. We were hooked. We couldn't give out stuff. We were very strongly in the position in those days, and correctly so, that this was the South Vietnamese war. We were there to advise them, and we couldn't be the news.

Then, of course, it was a war that was difficult to report. The interesting news was when the Vietcong attacked, and nobody knew when that would happen. And then when something happened, the newspapermen were sore that they weren't there

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and covered themselves up and blamed the Americans. Then they wanted to fly in our helicopters. Well, we were most anxious to reduce the visibility of the Americans, and every time you took anybody in a helicopter it was the American's war, and it increased the

visibility of the Americans. So that there were conflicts of interest involved, and I was very unhappy during that period because all the reports coming out of Diem were about Americans, not the battle being put up by the Vietnamese. You remember that period when we were trying very hard to keep the South Vietnamese in the fore. And I think it was very important to do it. There was a morale factor involved and also a question of just Asian and world opinion.

SCHLESINGER: What was President Kennedy's picture of Vietnam? It always was kind of a second problem because he had Berlin and...

HARRIMAN: I don't know. I had direct contact with him about Laos. We had some direct contacts about Indonesia and so forth. In Vietnam it was always with McNamara and the chiefs and Dean Rusk, and so my interjections were only occasional, and I never fully understood—I know he paid a great deal of attention. I remember one of these occasions was when Mac Bundy called me "the crocodile" because something was said, and the President said, "Do all of you here agree?" And I said three or four sentences which indicated that I totally disagreed, but perhaps not as rudely as Roger [Laughter], and Mac told

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me afterwards—he said that was the second-best speech, statement, he'd ever heard in the White House. He probably has forgotten that now. I've forgotten who the first best was. [Laughter]

But I've learned, dealing with the White House, that you have a split second. The President looks around the room to decide whether you're going to be among those that agree or to register your difference. I think that was the great trouble with the Bay of Pigs. I think the people there—Dean Rusk particularly, most at fault, didn't realize that he had to come out against it right away. But having worked in the White House as long as I have, I realize that you can't wait. I'm not talking about your situation, Arthur, where you were working in the White House. You would go back and think it over and come back. But when the President is making some basic decision in a roomful of people, everybody who is there approves it if he doesn't speak out, and the President has a right to consider they approve.

So I've forgotten what this was. I remember the President was quite—I was right about it. I've forgotten what it was, but it did affect his opinion. It did affect his decision. It either held it up or changed it. And that was when, remember, Mac called me "the crocodile."

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

HARRIMAN: Mouth open and I bit, you know. [Laughter] But I never talked

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unless there was some reason for it. I never had a very real understanding

of just where he went. My feeling about it was that he supported it, yes, but he was not at all keen to see it escalate into a major conflict, and wanted to play it down as much as he possibly could. I just don't know the relationship of Dean Rusk to this thing when these things were talked about. I just can't understand how anybody could have stood by and permitted the President to have given out this statement that within a year we would have half as many people...\*

SCHLESINGER: A thousand people would be out by December 31, or something like that.

HARRIMAN: Something like that. I just don't understand how he did it. He didn't consult me. He didn't consult Sullivan. It's interesting because...

SCHLESINGER: That statement was made without consultation with the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs?

HARRIMAN: No, I was then Undersecretary, I think.

SCHLESINGER: Undersecretary.

HARRIMAN: Oh, Roger was Assistant Secretary for FE I guess. Yes, Roger was there. The history of this statement—it was included in the report that was drafted in Saigon by Taylor. Sullivan was there representing me, the State Department, and he refused to sign it. He said, "If this goes in I would have to put in a minority report," so Taylor took it out. And then when they

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got to the White House—Taylor had been talking to McNamara, and he hadn't talked to Sullivan or anybody else—McNamara took Taylor's statement. So this was passed to the President. Now I don't know who else was in the room. I wasn't there, and out came this statement. Taylor never told anybody that this had been objected to by anybody. Maybe he didn't know. Maybe Sullivan was involved in the drafting committee, I don't know. I don't know how it happened, but this was a statement that had been rejected by the representative of the State Department in Saigon. Now Rusk got blamed for it because this was the kind of thing he didn't want to interfere with. It was his job to interfere, you know. I've been brought up on the other school, you know, under Roosevelt. Of course, as far as the British are concerned, the Chiefs of Staff are technical advisers to the War Cabinet. They have no such status as they have here.

But even under the war, President Roosevelt kept complete control, and General Marshall would not interfere with political matters. He would give his judgments. But that was one unfortunate fact that they were so bent on winning the war with the least number of American lives that they failed to recognize that they were costing a hell of a lot of American

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\* Note on original transcript: He had about 16,000 at that time—check figures.



lives by not cleaning situations up as they went along. But that's too long a story to get involved with here.

But I'm just trained by experience and knowledge of the

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need for domination of the military by civilians because they are trained to do certain things. They're engineers. I was brought up on the theory that you appoint an engineer a president of a corporation and it is sure to go bankrupt. That isn't always true, but it's very apt to be because they have the construction idea, you know. They construct and create and so forth, and not the idea of how you're going to make money out of it. And the same thing is true of the soldiers. Their idea is how are you going to win the military situation without regard of how you're going to build political foundations.

So I really think that it's very fair to say that Dean Rusk's failure to interpose political judgments at the important times was one of the reasons we got so far afield from reality. Now whether it would have changed the eventual outcome, I can't prove it. How can I prove it? I think what is a fact is that if we had known in the late '50s what we do now about guerrilla warfare, we would have trained the army more in guerrilla warfare. We would have started earlier on social and economic stuff which was necessary to capture the villages and hamlets and the local people against the Vietcong—all the things we are now doing all over the world, in South America and Thailand. I think this whole thing could have been dealt with.

But to do Diem justice, he complained, I'm told, that

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we were training his soldiers to fight a Korean-type war, whereas he felt they ought to be trained in guerrilla warfare. Well, our commanding officer—I've forgotten who it was and don't think he was to blame, because he was following out the Joint Chiefs' conception. It wasn't until too late that we began to recognize the problems of guerrilla warfare, the problems of subversion and terror and so forth. You know they went through all those steps. Now if we had understood them, and when I say "we" I mean the whole government had understood them—that's where Roger understood this, you see. That's where he was very impatient whenever you went against his prescribed clear method of dealing with this guerrilla action. He is an authority on the subject. He studied it and knows it. So that I think you can say that if we had known as much, the government as a whole had known as much about communist subversion, terror, guerrilla warfare, and so forth, as we do now, the whole situation might have been different.

But I can't say that any single step taken between when President Kennedy went into it and after the Taylor mission could have been changed and things could have been different, and things would have been better. I do know that this statement wouldn't have been made by the President if Dean Rusk had consulted the Department. These things I know, but I can't tell you that if it had been operated by the State

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Department as the senior with the Pentagon as the supporter things would be different today. I can't prove that. I believe it to be true, but I can't prove it.

SCHLESINGER: What was Max Taylor's role?

HARRIMAN: A most loyal adviser to the President, very earnest, sincere, very close to Bobby—and, you know, the President; he had a great deal of influence on him. They thought his judgment was good, excellent. He had very limited political factors there. He couldn't have accepted this idea and had great.... You know, you become the prisoner of your organization. From low level on up each officer depends upon the information he receives and acts upon it. If he thinks it's wrong, why then he fires some people, and reorganizes the whole thing. But they're trained—they have to operate on positive facts. Otherwise, you can't say, well, maybe I'll do this or maybe I'll not. You've got to make a decision to go or not go. I don't know whether I'm making myself clear.

He followed the advice of Harkins, General Harkins. Accepted it, and none of us did. We didn't believe it; we didn't think it was true. We thought it was far too optimistic and that we were not checking back on the strategic hamlets. We were not insisting that this whole concept of clear and hold which had been accepted was carried out. We were going against the advice of Thomson, who was the British

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expert. So this wasn't any secret. These were things that were known to be true.

Now, as I say, these were mistakes that were made, but whether they would have changed, whether they would have been sufficiently—I just don't want to go on record as indicating that I think the mistakes that were made were sufficiently grave, that they affected—that it would have prevented us from getting into the present situation. I sincerely believe that the election period was one that got us into greater difficult, because....

I must say this: I think these various mistakes that we made did encourage the North Vietnamese and the Chinese to believe that South Vietnam was going to fall into their laps like a ripe plum. Now it wasn't only the greater success they had. The fact that they broke down the whole strategic hamlet concept must have given them a tremendous boost up. But the election coming along made it impossible for the President to take the initiative as vigorously as he might have done if he hadn't. Looking back at it, if we had begun to put the heat on North Vietnam somewhat earlier, they might not have become so convinced, as they appear to be today, that they can win. And I think we are going to have to go through a considerable period of time and effort to convince them that they cannot win. What of course is so reassuring is to find

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President Johnson so utterly determined to carry it through.

SCHLESINGER: Would you have favored an American troop commitment in '61 or '62?

HARRIMAN: No, I was very much opposed to it. And I was not for Rostow's "bomb Hanoi." I was for trying to win it on the ground. But we didn't do the best job we could on trying to win it on the ground. We never really got after the clear and hold. The strategic hamlet was a numbers racket. It was, how many can you get to it?—that some of them were well protected; some of them were badly protected; some of them went way beyond any chance to reinforce them if they were attacked. And then, as I say, there were gaps left for the Vietcong to come in around it. So I was very strongly for that method of dealing with it.

One of the times I was consulted was in the Christmas—I was in favor of an attack on North Vietnam at Christmas, you remember? There was a question of whether an attack be made and it was decided not to do it. This was...

SCHLESINGER: This was in '64.

HARRIMAN: In '64, yes. So that I was thoroughly in sympathy with the reaction against the attack on our destroyers, and I have been for stepping it up a little sooner than we have, but I don't think you can blame the President for being cautious, because it's a rough situation. But I do think that if we had done this thing right from the beginning on, I do believe

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we would be better off today, particularly, in not having encouraged North Vietnam and China on their ability to win.

SCHLESINGER: Anything else you would like to add on Vietnam?

HARRIMAN: No, not at the moment.

END OF TAPE

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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