

Frederick E. Nolting Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 5/06/1970
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Biographical Note

Frederick E. Nolting (1911-1989) was the Ambassador to South Vietnam from 1961 to 1963. This interview covers the relationship between the United States and South Vietnamese governments during the Kennedy administration, the political issues in South Vietnam, and United States' policy concerning Vietnam, among other topics.

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Second Oral History Interview

with

FREDERICK NOLTING

May 6, 1970
New York, New York

By Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Oral History Program
of the Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I think in terms of your appointment,
I'd like to go back to the time. . . .

[Interruption] At the time that you were ap-
pointed ambassador, was there any special
understanding that you reached with the
Secretary or the President in regard to the
peculiar and special situation in Vietnam?

NOLTING: Yes, there were two things that I recall par-
ticularly. One was that the mission had to
be--and this was the President's own view--
a unified mission with the ambassador in over-
all control and authority and having overall
responsibility. And this was particularly
necessary because, as you know, almost every

department and agency of government dealing with foreign affairs was there, not only the Department of State^g but the Department of Defense, through the military advisers and the military supply outfit, the U.S. AID^[Agency for International Development] ^{USOM} ^[Central Intelligence Agency] called then ^[United States Operations Mission] ^[United States Information Agency] ~~USAM~~, the CIA, USIA. And it was a mission that had to be pulled together to work as a team. This was understood from the beginning. ^A It was reinforced later on at the time ^{MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam]} ~~MAC-V~~ was created, which elevated the military into a sub-regional command with a four-star general^[General], my good friend, Paul Harkins took the command. It became even more necessary that there be a close working relationship and a complete understanding throughout the mission, and in certain cases a question of whose ultimate responsibility it was. That was one point. This was not only clearly understood from the beginning^g but was reinforced as time went on by President Kennedy. ^A The other point ~~that~~ was a less important one, but it's one that concerns

me. And that was the duration of my mission over there. I remember a talk with Dean Rusk in which I said ^gthat, looking down the road about two years from the time I was to go, which was in April or May, 1961, that all four of our children would have to be back in the United States in school or college. We had four daughters and I didn't want to have them completely cut off from all family life for too long a period. Two of them were already in college. The younger two were with us in Saigon, going to school there. And I said that I hoped that things would go well enough and that we could bring the situation along, and asked Dean whether or not the two-year tour of duty seemed to him about right. And my recollection of this--and it is important in view of some things that I heard ^ghe said, later on ^{is} "Yes, this seemed ^{se} quite satisfactory." In fact, he laughed and said, "Perhaps the way things are going, we'll be lucky if we have a mission there for six months ^{he}."

O'BRIEN: Well, in. . . .

NOLTING:

so that this understanding was in my mind later on when I had the opportunity to ~~go~~ when I felt the need. In about eighteen months from the time I went to ~~the~~ no, it was almost two years from the time I went to call attention to this, it seemed to have been forgotten in the Department. And when I said, ~~and~~ and this was before the outbreak of the Buddhist agitation, at a period ^{in which} ~~when~~ things seemed to be going very well indeed ^{when} I asked about the desirability of finding a successor and making a quiet transition without any change in policy. There was word coming back, "Well, you stay there." In effect, ^g "We don't want to hear anything more about this."

And I felt the need to remind them of the previous agreement ^{and} the reasons for it, which were strictly personal. The reason I insist on mentioning this, the reason I do mention this one, is that later on, I was told by a number of people in Congress that I had been somewhat accused of leaving when the going got rough. And this really burned me up.

O'BRIEN: Who made those accusations? Do you recall?

NOLTING: I was told--I've never been sure--that the Secretary of State implied this ^{of} Dean Rusk, in testifying before Congressional committees. And some of the members who later told me about it ~~later~~ raised the question as to why I had been pulled out. And ^{it's} for this reason ~~it is~~ that I mention this ^{as} as a prior understanding reached way back in early 1961.

O'BRIEN: Right. Now ^{of} before you went over there, did you have any brief ^{ings} conversations or anything that stands out to memory in the way of things of that nature ^{of} briefings that were particularly relevant and important to you in getting an understanding and a grasp ^{of} of the situation [?] or ^{on} on the other hand ^{may} may not have been, may have been misleading?

NOLTING: I think the sixty-four dollar question which was debated in the task force which I mentioned earlier in the interview a couple of years ago--^{when was that?} four years ago it was.

O'BRIEN: ⁶⁶ ~~Sixty-six~~. It's been some time.

NOLTING: The principle ^{al} thing was whether or not the

independence of South Vietnam was support-
able through the [Ngo Dinh] Diem government,
which was, as you know, the duly elected
constitutional government that we had been
supporting since 1954.⁷ There had been a lot
of questions raised about this in previous
administrations. There was a certain lack
of understanding, I think, between the Amer-
ican mission and the government of South
Vietnam from the beginning. There'd always
been this division of opinion on the American
side as to whether President Diem and his
way of running the government was going to
be ultimately successful, and therefore, wheth-
er we should try to support the country through
that government. There had been attacks on
him in our press before. There had been at-
tacks on his brothers, particularly Ngo Dinh
Nhu and his wife, Madame Nhu.⁷ And the ques-
tion was, really, is this a viable thing and
should the United States continue to support
South Vietnam through the only available ve-
hicle, which was the government of South Vietnam.

I went to Saigon with a completely open mind on this ^{subject} mind. The conclusions of the task force were a very definite yes, that this was a viable situation and we should continue to support South Vietnam through its elected constitutional government; namely, the Diem government. But, as ^{is} it the case with anyone ^{body} new, one wants to find out by getting to know a person and getting to know his philosophy and his way of doing things, his character, and that of his principal assistants. And, so I spent a lot of time when I first got out there on this. And I came out with what I felt was a fresh conclusion: that this was an extremely able and ^e dedicated man, working in a very difficult situation, subject to a great deal of unjust criticism, having weaknesses, of course, as all of us do. But, a person of real integrity, whose philosophy I could agree with and I felt the American people could agree with and would agree with, ^g doing his best, working his head off, inept

in the handling of public relations and particularly American public relations, but terribly concerned to try to bridge the gap between the mores and customs and traditions of his own people and those of the West, trying to put together the best parts of both and drop off the other parts, and very much concerned with the deeper, philosophical problems of government as well as with the question of survival against the Viet Cong and the attacks that they were mounting on him. ^A So I would say, in answer to your question--I've gone a little far afield on this--the sixty-four dollar question was: is this a viable, sustainable thing through this government? And my conclusion to it was completely in accord with the task force--which constituted pretty much my briefing, which was very short, indeed, but rather intensive. My conclusion was yes.

O'BRIEN: Well, in regard to that task force, Roswell Gilpatric was the chairman of it. ^{NOLTING: Was the chairman of it, yes. does} Now ^{O'BRIEN;} the fact that he's from Defense cause any friction

with the State Department?

NOLTING: No, it was a puzzle to me from the beginning why, in this situation which was more political and economic and social than it was military at that time--it was a puzzle to me why the task force was chaired by the Deputy Secretary of Defense rather than by, let's say, the under Secretary of State. It was a puzzle to me why the State Department, ~~threw~~ ^{through} out my tour of duty out there, abdicated as much as it did to the Department of Defense. Bob [Robert] McNamara was in Vietnam or met with us in Honolulu every month for two years. Dean Rusk never set foot in the place nor in Honolulu to talk about this. [¶] When I wanted to talk to the State Department about it, aside from telegrams, which were daily, I came back to Washington, and then sometimes had some difficulty ⁱⁿ getting the attention of the Secretary of State, who at that time seemed altogether concerned. I'm sure this is not quite accurate, but to me, ^{it} appeared that his major focus of interest was East-West

??
do you mean preoccupied or uninterested??

relations, namely U.S.-Russian affairs, and this was quite a side issue. So, it is true that the Defense Department stepped into the breach, even though I think it's fair to say that McNamara realized, himself, that it was not principally a military situation, it was principally a political, psychological, social, economic struggle.

O'BRIEN: Are people in the Department at this point saying that Vietnam is a military problem, from, let's say about 1961, rather than a political one?

NOLTING: You mean during this. . . .

O'BRIEN: Did you ever run across that feeling at all?

NOLTING: No. I think people in the Department of State--you mean in the State Department, what are they saying?

O'BRIEN: Right.

NOLTING: I think they recognize that it was a political problem. And I must say, everytime this came up, in terms of small or large questions about ultimate responsibility in the task force that we'd formed up there, in the

various sub-groupings of that task force, --
who would chair them? -- We got backing that
it should be a political officer. This wasn't
universally the case, but, generally speaking.
And we had very good cooperation on this score
in the mission in Saigon, where the military
as well as the CIA and all the rest realized
that this is the way it should be since the
problem was perhaps three-quarters political.

O'BRIEN: Well, then, your instructions when you go out
there are basically the instructions that the
task force will agree on, that you referred
to in your instructions in your previous in-
terview. ^{NOLTING: YES. O'BRIEN:} And that's basically it, from what
the task force determines. What how do
you feel about that task force? Do you feel
that they had people that were the most know-
ledgeable on Vietnam and Southeast Asia on
the task force? A little earlier, I asked
you about briefing. Is there any--as you
look at Washington from the perspective of
being there in 1961, then going out to the

field. Whose advice and insights do you find when you get out there, that you got back in Washington, are most helpful? Is there anyone in particular that you. . . ?

NOLTING: Well, let me say that the composition of the task force seemed to me to be good. They were knowledgeable. One person I learned a lot from was Ed Lansdale; he sat in on it. I wasn't there very long; it seems to me it was about two weeks, maybe two and a half weeks. I'd just come from NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in Paris. But I thought the people were knowledgeable. When I got out there, the Office of Far Eastern Affairs in the State Department gave me good and helpful support and advice. [Walter P.] McConaughy was then Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and he was very level-headed, I thought, person and very good. Um, others--Bill Colby was the CIA man out there. And he was an old hand at Vietnam and was very good, I thought. He was later succeeded by John Richardson, who was also very good. Let's

?
Bill
Colby

see who else. I'll probably strike this out of the record, but Joe (Joseph) Mendenhall was head of the political section and when I got ^{out a} up there, acting Chief of Mission, because the Deputy was away on leave, and he was shortly thereafter transferred. And Joe had rather the opposite point of view--and I'm sure quite sincerely held it--about the viability and the effectiveness of the Diem government. And, I must say, I was exposed to a lot of Joe's very frank views on this when I got out there. And, as I say, I tried to look into it myself, on my own, and came up with the opposite conclusion. So that after a period of transition, I benefited a lot from Joe's advice and knowledge of the country, but he was ultimately transferred out.

O'BRIEN: Well, when you get there, there's a number of things. . . . What do you find in the way of the viability of the South Vietnamese government? Of course, at this point, they're being impacted by ⁹ the, particularly, the assault

on the local officials and everything that's taking place on the part of the VC. ^[Viet Cong] Has the morale and the integrity of the government in 1961 been pretty effectively decimated?

NOLTING: No, I didn't think so. I thought the morale was extraordinarily high. But one of the things that I recall very much in the briefing period was the figure of 2400 officials of the government who had been murdered or kidnapped in the provinces in the preceding year, the year before we got there, 1960. These were not counting ² these were civilians. These were people representing the government in agriculture or highway construction or school superintendants ^{or} or medical work or tax collectors. And it was a surprisingly large number to have been done away with by the Viet Cong. And this was one of the figures that showed the intensity, the revival of the intensity of Viet Cong terrorist activities. [¶] In spite of that loss, there ^g were people ^{were} volunteering for these jobs; there was a special training school which the United States had financed

through the U.S. AID, turning out young people, highly motivated, to go into the provinces on government assignment. The school was over-subscribed, as I recall, had more applicants than they could accommodate. And I visited it a number of times, talked to the young people studying there, and found it highly motivated and I thought very good. So the morale was pretty high. The medium level and, say, medium age middle-aged level of officials were not all that good. They were, for the most part, inherited from the French regime. They were more concerned to keep their jobs than anything, and it was a source of constant worry to President Diem and his top officials--Nguyen [Dinh] Thuan, for one, used to talk to me about this a great deal--to make these fellows get up off of their desk jobs and really roll up their sleeves and have some imagination and do the job, the many jobs that were necessary to be done. Uh, there had not been a strong civil service under the French--that is, native civil service. And

those that were left were, for the most part, somewhat timid and somewhat venal, if you can describe a whole group. Now, this didn't go for everybody. Some of them were O.K. But the general level I didn't think was very high. The purpose of the training school was to supplant--to train people to supplant these others gradually. But there was a lack of trained people. And the President and his government didn't have a full stable to call on when they needed somebody for a difficult assignment outside of Saigon.

O'BRIEN: Do you see any deterioration ^{of} on the morale on the part of the Vietnamese people? How would you describe what would be the impact of the increased Viet Cong activity in '60, '61, and then, of course, when you arrived?

NOLTING: I found the morale very different in the country, in the provinces, in the districts, in the villages, from what it was in Saigon. And this was true all the way through my tour of duty ^{out there}. Saigon is a very gossipy, volatile

place where people like to indulge in rumors, where the newspapers come out with all kinds of rumors and exaggerations. And ^gthe people in the country, however, were solid, I thought, very estimable peasants. Their elders were sound old men. They had their traditions and they kept them, but they were, for the most part, good people, not at all quick to panic. And I was impressed and heartened every time I went ^{out} into the countryside, which was frequently for the first six months out there. I guess I spent most of the time travelling ^g in the provinces, trying to get a feel of what it was like out there.

O'BRIEN: In 1961, when you went out there, was there any real problem at that point with Cambodia? Now, ^gI'm not necessarily talking about the presence of Viet Cong.

NOLTING: Yes, there's always been a problem with Cambodia. For one thing, the whole Parrot's Beak area, jut-out towards ^gSaigon, was disputed territory. The old maps, which the Vietnamese

were fond of pointing to, didn't have that in Cambodian territory. That was Vietnamese. I'm not sure when the present map was drawn, but I think it was at the time of the Geneva conference of 1954 which gave that territory to Cambodia, and it was a thorn in the flesh so far as the Vietnamese were concerned. They claimed that it had been theirs, that most of the people there were Vietnamese rather than Khmers. And there was always quite some bitterness on both sides. (Prince Norodom] Sihanouk was equally sensitive to this and claimed it, of course, as Cambodian territory. (Uh, but. . . . And of course, traditionally, the Vietnamese and the Cambodians have been enemies. There wasn't any love lost between them.

O'BRIEN: Did you find aid going through, or help going through, Vietnamese sources to groups like the Khmer^{Seri}seri in Cambodia in 1961?

NOLTING: From Viet Cong sources?

O'BRIEN: Well, no, from Vietnamese, South Vietnamese sources. In other words,

NOLTING: Refresh me on the ^hKhmer^{Seri}seri.

O'BRIEN: The ^h ^{15erai} ~~Kmerseris~~ was a group opposing Sihanouk, was an anti-Sihanouk group. Well, it's been suggested that. . . .

NOLTING: No, I don't. . . . To answer that as well as I can, I don't recall any overt or covert activities on the part of the Vietnamese government to try to unhorse Sihanouk. I remember the thing came up in conversation quite often one way or another, ^g either officially or at cocktail parties or something. And it was always the thought that they better live with their neighbor, ^g even though they didn't get along with him very well, ~~And,~~ rather than indulge in any kind of activity to try ^{to g} and unseat him. ^g There was, there were border incidents quite frequently. Sometimes the Cambodians would claim that the Vietnamese had beaten up on Khmer minorities in Vietnamese towns. ^g And, quite frequently, the reverse was claimed by the South Vietnamese government. ^g But, I don't remember any plot or support to any plot from the Vietnamese side to unseat Sihanouk.

O'BRIEN: There wasn't anything going through Vietnam in the way of CIA ^{to} to ^g Kmerseri, ^{to} was there, ^{to} from your vantage point at that ^{five} point?

NOLTING: No, not so far as I know, and I think I would have known.

O'BRIEN: I understand that during the time that your predecessor, Ambassador [Elbridge] Durbrow, was there, that there was friction with the Embassy, the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia. Was there any indication that there was any friction?

NOLTING: Between our mission?

O'BRIEN: Yes, between the missions.

NOLTING: No. I went over several times to see Bill [William C.] ~~Trumbull~~ ^{Trimble} who was Ambassador in Phnom Penh then. We would talk, and Bill was an old friend, and we would talk about this. And naturally, he thought that on most of these border incidents, probably the Cambodians had a lot on their side because he'd heard that side of the story, and I had heard the other side of the story. And we would swap views and the information that we'd have.

But, we got along very well together and saw each other quite frequently. For the most part, we felt that we were ~~that we~~ had our hands full in South Vietnam and were not concerned about Cambodia other than the fact --and this has always been the case--that ^{it} ~~is~~ was alleged and proven, even in those days, that the Viet Cong didn't withdraw across the border when they were gotten into a hot spot and refreshed themselves and came back again from that area. And the Cambodian government sort of winked at it. I think they had no means, really, to cope with it and therefore, had a tendency to brush it under the rug, pretend that it wasn't happening. And it was on that score I remember talking a great deal with Bill ^{Trimble} ~~Trumbull~~.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Well, in the fifties, the CIA had had a lot of activities in Southeast Asia in the way of operations that had ~~been~~ become quite controversial. Did you find anything when you went there as Ambassador to Vietnam, particularly, that you objected to or in any

way urged the Department to ease up^{or} or eliminate?

NOLTING: Across the border?

O'BRIEN: Well, either across the border or in Vietnam.

NOLTING: Activities of the CIA?

O'BRIEN: Yes, that were within your. . . .

NOLTING: Let me see. Let me see. There were some things

. . . . yes, there were some things about raids across the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] which the South Vietnamese were doing^g but with our--now I say "our" being CIA job--training and approval and equipment. Some of these we considered, after taking a close look at them, were counter-productive, not that they 2 were not justified in the sense that the other side was doing it ten times as much to the South. On moral grounds, one might say, "Sure^{ly} They had a right to strike back." But the trouble with some of them^g was^g in my judgment and the judgment of those of us who studied them^g was that they were counter-productive, they lost a lot^g and they stirred up reprisals which were

greater than the effect of the raids themselves. Others were good and were continued. These were done by South Vietnamese with CIA material, help, and training.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Were there any other programs?

NOLTING: Let's see. . . .

O'BRIEN: I know SWITCHBACK _____ was eventually, as I understand it, was shifted to the Defense Department. But I think that comes a little later.

NOLTING: Right. I remember that code word? I can't remember what the operation was.

^{Rg}
O'BRIEN: It was very much associated with the training of Montagnards and the training of. . . .

NOLTING: The training of Montagnards had been going on for quite a while, and these were the people living, as you know, on the Laotian border. And this was intensified. And these special forces were used as a nucleus for each Montagnard training camp. And in my opinion, they were very good. They were very successful. Uh, not one hundred per cent always, but they had a great inhibiting effect on the infiltration.

And far from calling those off, we built them up.

O'BRIEN: Did they. . . Did those programs make the South Vietnamese nervous at all, ^{g continuing} training the Montagnards?

NOLTING: Yes, because the South Vietnamese had had a hard time getting the Montagnards' cooperation. There had been a Montagnard Nationalist leader who wanted to break the whole Montagnard area away from South Vietnam. Diem was himself concerned about this. At one time, he was a province chief under the French in an area which had a lot of Montagnards in it. And he knew them pretty well. He had, in effect, been governing ^{ed g} them as province chief in a certain area. ^g I went ^{with him} up to this province with him and went all around it. He said, "Don't go too far on this because these people will, before long, confront you with a demand for independence and then you will have wedded yourself to them and will find a real difficulty here in South Vietnam on this." But he never ^g when we explained exactly what we were doing

at these Montagnard camps, the special forces camps, so far as I can recall ^g he never objected. He wanted to know precisely, however, what we were doing. And so did ^{Nhu} ^c Ngu, his brother. And both John Richardson, and before him, Bill Colby, took pains to explain this very precisely so that there would not be this political issue arising about the Americans possibly training the Montagnards for a break-away political move.

~~O'BRIEN:~~ Uh, you have. . . .

~~NOLTING:~~ If I may just complete that. . . . What we tried to do with this government, and what I think we were successful in doing, was leveling with them. We tried to tell them everything we were doing, we tried to explain why it was in their interest that it should be done that way. We didn't try to ram things down their throat or make end runs. And the whole ^{se} idea was to try to make them as confident in this operation that we were helping them with as possible. It was the only way we could work.

And this was the basic instruction, really, the basic philosophy of my instructions, of our whold ^{ec} mission's instructions. We couldn't force things on them. We had to gain their confidence and use that confidence to get things done. ^Q For this reason, on the Montagnard issue, which is a good case in point here, we told them everything, I believe, that we were doing and we ^g got their agreement. Some of the province chiefs, for example, in those areas [^] who were Vietnamese-appointed by the government [^] were awfully hard to convince on this. They felt that we were going too far [^] and sometimes they would so report to the President ^o and he would ask me or others about it [^] and we would have to go through this explanation [^] ^{all over again}. But I think that they understood this pretty well [^] and the higher levels of the Vietnamese government agreed with it.

O'BRIEN: Well, you have Governor-general [Robert K.G.] Thompson there with that police-study mission for awhile.

NOLTING: Bob Thompson.

O'BRIEN: Right.

NOLTING: ^o Yeah. Yeso

O'BRIEN: Does he have any particular influence on yourself, people in the Embassy, the agency, the South Vietnamese government? And does that mission have any impact as you can see it?

NOLTING: Did it in those days?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

NOLTING: Yes. Bob Thompson was very good. He had a very small mission--six men. I think all of them had served at one point or another in Malaya under Sir Gerald Templer. Bob Thompson was the head of the British mission. He got there, I believe, shortly after I did. I liked him, worked closely with him, learned a lot from him. He was quite persuasive, vis-à-vis President Diem, who could see that he knew what he was talking about because of his experience in Malaya. We quite often went together to put up a proposal. Yes, they did good work. They did not have much to work with other than their experiences as individuals. They didn't have any supplies. They had only six people. And the British Embassy, of which this was a sort of loosely attached arm, I had the feeling was

a bit jealous of them. So, they quite often came to us. And I would say, "Well, have you talked to Harry ^[H.A.F.] [?] ^g ^c ~~Hohler~~ about this," or "No, Well, no, not yet." Hohler was the British ambassador from there then. Perhaps this is unfair, but I did have the feeling that the British government very reluctantly, or at least the British diplomatic establishment, very reluctantly accepted this. They didn't want to get involved in the sort of ^g the grubby work of winning the counter-insurgency. They wanted to have just the diplomatic mission ^{g and} ¹ that is all ^g and not be too involved in the thing. And so, ^g when Bob Thompson was helping to work out schemes, ^g as with the Montagnard, ¹ and pacification methods, which we had a lot to do with also--and when he was working very closely with us, I think the British diplomatic establishment had the feeling that perhaps this was dragging Great Britain too much into the grubbiness of this whole effort. ^g But to answer your question as well as I can, I had a high respect for Bob Thompson. I think his knowledge

and ability was very good, and I think he was quite influential. ^{with the President}

O'BRIEN: His ideas were getting across to President Diem and ^{Nhu} ~~Ngu~~?

NOLTING: ^{Yes} And they corresponded very much with our own.

O'BRIEN: What's the feeling of the people in the Embassy and in the CIA who are particularly interested in this? Are they [?] ~~STRATEGIC~~ ^{strategic} Hamlet ^{of the} program have a lot of support among these people in late '61, early '62?

NOLTING: The ^{strategic} ~~STRATEGIC~~ Hamlet program, which was a great modification but successor of the ^{agroville} program, which was not a great success--at least it was reputed not to be. I visited several ^{agrovilles} which were pretty good, pretty staunch and stable. But this was a less ambitious thing in terms of moving people. In fact, it didn't move them at all. It just motivated them to fortify themselves and defend themselves in their ^{sûr} places. This ^{??} really got cranked up in '62.

O'BRIEN: ^{Yes} ^{Now is} Yeah. Was this the result of Thompson? Is Thompson's influence here?

NOLTING: I don't recall that the idea was Bob Thompson's. I know that it was mainly Ngo Dinh ^{Nhu} Ngu's idea, and he used to talk about it all the time and did a lot, a great deal to get it going. We helped him a great deal on it, in terms of material aid. Maybe the ^{strategic} STRATEGIC Hamlet program did borrow some experience from the Malayan example through the Thompson mission. But, it seems to me it was mostly ^{civil sui generis} through the Vietnamese government, mostly Ngo Dinh ^{Nhu} Ngu. I think he can be credited with the father of this thing.

O'BRIEN: At the time of the [Maxwell] Taylor ^{mission}, when the Taylor ^{Walt W. Rostow} mission comes off, when do you first become aware that they're coming and the reasons for their coming?

NOLTING: I don't exactly recall. It seems to me it was rather sudden so far as my knowledge of this mission is concerned. It was welcome, however. What it did was to give--and this was constantly happening; it happens all the time, I'm sure--but even though the mission,

the Embassy and all of its branches was reporting daily and recommending daily things to be done, Washington likes to send those people that have just been at a National Security Council meeting. They say, "You go out there and come back with a report." And so Max Taylor and Walt Rostow came--as I recall, rather suddenly--did a lot of looking around, traveling, conferences with President Diem and members of his government in which I and others in the mission participated, came up with the so-called Taylor report. It was, by and large, reinforcing what our instructions were already and what we were trying to do already.

O'BRIEN: Now, in regard to both Taylor and Rostow, as well as Secretary McNamara, you have a number of people who were coming out and learning about Vietnam rather quickly. And there's also--in government at this time⁹ there was a current of thinking about problems of nation-building, problems of creating viable

kinds of societies in Southeast Asia. Do you ever get the feeling that there's too little knowledge of a place like Vietnam and too much of an attempt to apply theories?

NOLTING: Oh, yes. I can say this with perfect objectivity because I didn't have ^{any} previous knowledge of Vietnam either. But I had the feeling, the longer I stayed, that what it took was an awful lot of living out there and experience, learning the country before you came up with a made-to-order formula for anything. And, sure, we have a tendency and it was exemplified many times, I think, during my experience in Vietnam, of people coming out or people on the spot like myself, ^{who} hadn't been there long enough. ^g There was a tendency to come up with a formula, "This is the way to do this," and then six months later you'd realize that you'd ^g ought to have learned a lot more. ^g ^{about} But given locality or certain way of thinking or acting on the part of the locals before you ventured to come up with any such formula. President Diem and his

government were constantly warning us on this score, and they were quite right. ^g Now, you can overdo that. You can have a paralysis of inaction in a situation which requires considerable action. And, ^g so, a happy medium on this is the solution, if you can ever get to it.

O'BRIEN: As early as 1961, and about the time that ^g of the Taylor-Rostow mission, ^{I've} I'd seen some indications in Washington from people who at that point were saying that this is a very, very serious problem in Vietnam and that without the The essence of the language would be something like: "Chances are against, probably sharply against, ^g preventing the fall of South Vietnam by any measure short of the introduction of U.S. troops on a substantial level." Does that?

NOLTING: I remember those expressions that came out from time to time in Washington from various people.

O'BRIEN: Now, ^g this ^{is} was 1961, about the time of the Taylor report. Does that, in a sense, correspond with your thinking at that point?

that if it turns into a real war, we can win that one because we know how to fight real wars. Don't let's do this. Take it as it is and try to put a poultice here and a bandage here and bring this sector up and that sector up and calm this area and treat it that way. This, I think, had some effect.

Q But there was always this tendency: "Well, let's wind this thing up, let's get cracking here. Why fiddle around^g?" They talked about a million dollars a day^g the total bill we reckoned up for Vietnam in those days, say in 1962, '61, '62, for all types of aid, including military assistance^g. It came to about three hundred and fifty million dollars a year or about a million dollars a day. And it seemed like one hell of a lot of money to be spending. And people used to point to that and say, "Where are the results for^{all} this money^g?" And my answer was generally, "I think there are results^g, and you can see them, but if you plunge this thing into a bigger war, the costs are going to be

astronomical, and the results are going to be less."

O'BRIEN: Well, passing over to the military side of this thing and some of the insights that you might have of them. When the mission was made into a larger mission and General (Paul D.) Harkins coming over, I understand that the State Department and I would guess you had some real reservations which were, in a sense, kicked back to Washington about the definition and the, you know, the instructions to that mission. What basically were your ^{at that point} ~~at that point~~ your questions and the State Department questions about that mission? Do you remember?

NOLTING: Yes. When ^{MACV} MAC-V was first announced, word came to us, to me in Saigon, that this was going to be a divided command. That is to say, two equal parts of the mission with equal authority and equal responsibility, namely, the four-star general, General Harkins, as ^{MACV} MAC-V would have all the military side and the rest would be under the ambassador. I

went back to Washington on this one because I was convinced that it would be a mistake. And I talked to various people, finally ended up talking with President Kennedy about it, who immediately agreed. And even though the orders had been written for a two-headed, equal-responsibility type of mission, he rescinded that. Then, he left it up to McNamara and me sort of to work it out, and to Max Taylor, who was in on the meeting. And that became rather difficult because McNamara gave me a ride on his airplane back to Honolulu. And all the way back through dinner and everything, we were arguing this point. And he was saying, "Just relax. It's not going to harm anything." And finally he said, "Well, the Joint Chiefs just won't stand still for a four-star general to be under an ambassador." I said, "I'm not asking for responsibility to meddle in military things. I'm not that much of a fool. Of course General Harkins knows military things and how to do them better than I.

But if it's a question, for example, of a crisis in which we see some unidentified airplanes over South Vietnam and the question is whether or not any available planes shall go up and engage them, somebody has got to be responsible for this because this could involve a war with China, for example. And I want to know whose responsibility it is." ^{OK} Well, we finally worked this out. And the President was, in his statement to me and to the others present, quite clear and definite on the subject. His answer was, "The ambassador is in overall authority and control," to which I responded, "Mr. President, you certainly realize that in questions of military training or strategy or advice that General Harkins may give President Diem and the South Vietnamese government on military matters, I'm not going to interfere because I recognize perfectly well that he's trained in this respect and I'm not. But on the overall questions of general U.S. policy, I think it has to be one way or the other." ^g And I think you must make

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it very clear." Well, he did make it clear in that statement in the White House. ⁷ And then there was a question of working it out all the way through the Pacific command and the whole line of command. And this got rather fuzzed up. It fortunately resolved itself because of very good working relationships between General Harkins and me, and I think a feeling of mutual esteem and respect, so that it never did come to an issue again. I mention it at some length not only because of your question but because it is something that ought to be clarified in every situation of this kind right from the beginning.

O'BRIEN:

Well, that problem now... [⊙] there is a problem there as I understand, with ~~CINCPAC~~ ^{CINCPAC [Comma in Chief Pacific]} which the State Department becomes involved in, and some thinking, as I understand, or at least Secretary Rusk a little later, as I understand, gets into the question of making Saigon (the military problem in Saigon) directly related and in communications to Washington rather than through Honolulu. Do you

become involved in this at all?

NOLTING: No, and I'm not quite sure that I understood that question, but I might add something to what I'd previously said which might cast light on this. I could not get Secretary Rusk interested in this at all, and that's why I had to go to the President.

O'BRIEN: Is that right?

NOLTING: On the earlier question of the two-headed command, he said, "Oh, it doesn't make any difference." And I said, "I beg to differ. It could make an awful lot of difference in how this whole thing goes, what the orientation of the mission is, whether it becomes more military and less political and economic and social. And it could make a whale of a difference in any emergency." And finally. . . Well, I'll tell you who took it up, who agreed with me in the State Department--^{it} was Aver^{ee}ill Harriman. And it was he who asked for and got the appointment with the President to pronounce on this one. But I couldn't get Rusk interested the least bit.

O'BRIEN: That's interesting. How does that relate with that letter, the letter that the President put out about the ambassador being the chief of mission that came out. . . .

NOLTING: I've forgotten whether that letter came later or earlier than this ^{MACV} MAC-V incident.

O'BRIEN: It was in May '61, I believe, May or June '61.

NOLTING: That was earlier, then, because ^{MACV} MAC-V was created in '62.

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O'BRIEN: Getting back to the ^{CINCPAC} ~~CinCPac~~ thing, as I understand, there was a lot of criticism of ~~it~~ in regard to the actual control of the military mission in Saigon, and ~~that~~ some in Washington felt that ^{CINCPAC} ~~CinCPac~~ should be ~~well~~, simply that there should be a more direct line of control from Saigon to Washington rather than through ^{CINCPAC} ~~CinCPac~~. Did you get involved in that at all?

NOLTING: There was, ^{yes, I} ~~yeah~~, there was some debate on the subject. ^[Harry D.] Don ~~Felt~~, who was ^{CINCPAC} ~~CinCPac~~ then, was also a good friend, came out frequently, and we saw him frequently, and he and Harkins and I worked very closely together. I don't

MACV

think that the MAC-V ever tried to be an independent theatre command. It was a sub-theatre command. And being principally an advisory--being altogether ^{an} advisory and training and supply mission for South Vietnamese forces, it wasn't big enough. It didn't have enough forces in it to be an independent command. And so far as I know (maybe Harkins would have a different view on this--I can't recall), but I don't think that there was any feeling ^{that} ~~was~~ between Harkins and ~~(Admiral Harry D.)~~ Felt (who was CinCPac), that this ought to be changed, and I know it wasn't. It never occurred to me that it ought to be changed.

O'BRIEN: You, in your last interview, you mentioned . . . well, you got into the problem with the press, and you mentioned Homer Bigart and Malcolm Browne and [David] Halberstam was not mentioned in this. Uh, these fellows caused you a considerable amount of irritation while you were there, in their criticisms of Vietnam and of Diem. What is the . . .

NOLTING: They didn't cause me so much irritation as they caused me great alarm and pain. I used to talk to them all the time. I rather liked them personally in many ways. But they were undermining the thing all the time^g constantly-- not so much Mal Browne to begin. But when I got out there, Bigart was there^g and his slogan was "sink or swim with Diem." Do you remember?

O'BRIEN: ^gYeah. Yes.

NOLTING: Sink or swim. The implication in all of his articles was that if we stuck with Diem, we would sink, as if we were tied to a stone. This I fundamentally disagreed with^g and this was the constant slant of all of his articles. He was succeeded by Halberstam who^g at first, I thought^g was a considerable improvement. But within a few months, he was doing the same thing, only more so--finding things to criticize about the Diem government and very seldom, if ever, mentioning the good things they were doing.

O'BRIEN: Are they doing a fair and accurate job^{of} reporting? Are they doing ~~good~~ their homework in doing their reporting?

NOLTING: I did not think so. I thought they did too much of it at the Caravelle Bar by sort of consulting with each other as to what the latest Saigon rumor about the malfeasance of the government might be and how to dress that up into a story. Now this would make them just as mad as hops. ^{because} They did go out into the country quite a bit. But there again, I thought they failed to see the woods for the trees. They would come back with an emotional story of someone ^{boy} who had been ^{we'll say} maltreated ^{of} or ^g allegedly maltreated by a district chief of the government, and they would talk about that rather than what the district chief was doing to defend his district against the Viet Cong and what he was doing for the people. My own feeling was that they were quite unjust, quite unjust, ⁱⁿ in the overall picture they gave of what the Vietnamese government was trying to do and what it was, ^{in fact} in fact, doing for the benefit of its own people.

O'BRIEN: Getting to what we talked about ^{a little} earlier ^g about the morale of the government of

Vietnam and the activities of the Viet Cong within Vietnam at the time you assumed office as ambassador. Now, in the next two years, do you see any decided change or any decided shifts? Is there an increase in Viet Cong activity over that time?

NOLTING: The rate of infiltration remained fairly constant, and this was small units or individuals like, ^{we} say, a communicator or a planner or an artilleryman or something of that sort. They came in in small units, and we estimated it at the rate of something like five hundred a month. No major units of North Vietnamese military. The rate of supply increased some because of the Laotian settlement. The Ho Chi Minh trail was, ^{as} I am fond of saying, turned into the Harriman Memorial Highway. It opened that because it impeded and inhibited the South Vietnamese from going across the border and trying to stop the infiltration of supplies and people before they got into South Vietnam. [¶] Incidentally, one of the things that I believe caused the rift between Aver^ell Harriman

and Ngo Dinh Diem was Diem's opposition to the Laotian treaty which Harriman negotiated. And I thought his opposition was well based and well founded because he realized that the communists would sign this agreement and not live up to it. And therefore, the net effect of it would be against the defense effort in South Vietnam.

O'BRIEN: How were the Vietnamese interdicting the supply lines in

NOLTING: For one thing, the ^{Meo} ~~Mao~~ tribesmen in that area of Laos were under CIA's help, were themselves attacking the infiltrators. For another thing, they would cooperate with the Vietnamese who occasionally would go across the line for interdiction operations when they knew something was coming in. All of this was stopped by the Laotian agreement of 1962. The ^{Meos} ~~Maus~~ no longer got any help from our side, and there were many of them killed and driven out. And the Vietnamese were precluded from going into Laos.

O'BRIEN: Is the route across... well, is there much coming across the DMZ or coming in by sea at that time?

NOLTING: We had a junk fleet, for one thing, and other things. The sea infiltration was not great; it never was. Across the DMZ was not very great. It was mostly from the west via the so-called Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos and through Cambodia. Now, there was infiltration of supplies down the Mekong, and that probably came in by sea, coming into the area of Sihanoukville and being transported over to the Mekong and coming ^{down} ~~over~~ that way. But by far, the bulk of it, in my opinion and the opinion of all of us who studied this almost on a day to day basis, was across the Laotian border and the Cambodian border via the Ho Chi Minh trail.

O'BRIEN: The CIA, therefore, had some pretty good intelligence sources from their connections with it. ^{in Laos} In terms of the strategy of the Viet Cong and some of their activities, do you see any decided shifts between '61 and '63?

at the time you were there?

NOLTING: No, I think that the... my feeling on this whole subject was that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese were prepared to play this game out under the ground rules then existing, and this, to my mind, was an important point. One never knew when they would change the ground rules. But during that period, they played it under the ground rules of a contest between Vietnamese, with North Vietnam supporting the Viet Cong, and China and Russia supporting the Viet Cong with equipment, and ~~South-Viet~~, the South Vietnamese being supported by the Americans, but in a limited way. In other words, it hadn't developed to the point that each side was pouring in additional reinforcements. And I don't believe that it got any more intense during the two and a half years that I was there. In fact, it seemed in '62 that it was calming down a little bit. Then, in fact, I was convinced that our side was winning in this limited struggle. Then, the political ploy came in of the Buddhist uprising and the

number one objective of the Viet Cong was to overthrow the Diem government and to create a political vacuum, political chaos. And they did this via the Buddhist movement.

O'BRIEN: Did you, in terms of evidence, in terms of intelligence, did you see anything that really linked and indicated the Viet Cong and the Buddhist crisis?

NOLTING: I can now, later. But at the time, you could only see a parallel between the objectives of the Buddhist agitators and the objectives of the Viet Cong, and that parallel was to throw over the Diem government. Of course, there was circumstantial evidence that some of these guys had just come into the pagodas; they'd just shaved their heads and put on saffron robes and had become monks, bonzes. And one could have very healthy and well-founded suspicions that they were no more bonzes than you or me. ^{te} But we had no hard, concrete evidence that it was a Viet Cong plot. I believed it was. I believe now without any question that it was. But

obviously our government didn't believe this because, among other things, [Henry] Cabot Lodge gave asylum to Tri Thich Quong ⁱⁿ the U.S. Embassy, and he was the ringleader.

O'BRIEN: What happens to Diem in these years, and Ngu^{h-c} as you see them as people, as persons? Do they change at all? It's been suggested that they become more isolated.

NOLTING: This was one of the favorite themes of the press, and Mike Mansfield's report to the President of 1962, which really drove the first nail in Diem's coffin in my opinion, said this. He had gotten most of his information, I think, on this point from the American press corps in Saigon. And I think it was a mistake. I think it was an injustice. And I don't think ~~think~~ that Diem or his government were any more isolated. In fact, I think they were less isolated. [Interruption]

O'BRIEN: Well, you've referred in your earlier interview, as well as a good deal of the writing about Vietnam has talked about the struggle between Diem and Ho Chi Minh for the allegiance of the

Vietnamese people, as nationalist hero. Do you see any shift in that in Vietnam in the time that you're there? Do you see Diem's popularity as a kind of charismatic figure deteriorating?

NOLTING:

Uh, he continued to be not popular because that's the wrong expression out there. No political leader is popular. He was respected in the sense of a good mandarin. This is important because ^{political} good leadership is whether the man is just and whether he rules well. It's not whether he reflects popular opinion. This doesn't mean anything to ^{them} him. They think that's silly ^{reflecting} reflecting popular opinion. They want a just person, a person who doesn't steal and make crazy decisions and involve them in unnecessary difficulties and wars and things. Diem's reputation as a just leader in the provinces of Vietnam, where eighty-five per cent of the people lived, was as high at the time of his murder, I think, as it was during any time of the nine years of his rule. He was respected as a just person in the provinces. ¶ In Saigon

and in some of the other cities, there was all kinds of agitation against him and his regime and his family, particularly the ^{Nhus} ~~Ngus~~. I thought the Saigon reflex^{ct}ion was much overdone in the U.S. impression, in the reporting and all. I thought the provincial attitude of "here's a good ruler, a just man" was absolutely ignored in our press, and I think this had a profound effect on our government. To answer your question as well as I can, he never was charismatic in that sense. ^{The} ~~That~~ image, that picture, doesn't fit political leadership in Vietnam.

- O'BRIEN: How about Ho Chi Minh?
- NOLTING: He was respected, too. This was a contest between two nationalists, one a communist and ^{the other} one not a communist, abhorring communism. But I don't think. . . . See, they knew each other. They lived on the opposite sides of the Perfume River near Hué. Ho Chi Minh was somewhat older than Ngo Dinh Diem, but they knew each other; they respected each other. They could have worked this out

between them in my opinion. I talked to Diem quite often about this.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever see any attempts between them to work things out?

NOLTING: Not directly. But some of these reports that ^{Nhu} Ngu was collaborating with the Viet Cong were part of a plan which ^{Nhu} Ngu and his brother, the President. . . . The President knew all about ^{to g} it. Some Viet Cong leaders would come into ^{Nhu's} Ngu's office in the ^{to g} Palace and talk about this possibility. And they came under ^a gentlemen's agreement that they wouldn't be nabbed while they were there.

O'BRIEN: Were these same kind of understandings present in terms of ^{... O'NOLTING: I knew about this} are you talking about the escalation thing ^{O' O'BRIEN:} of keeping the struggle, keeping it down to a minimum of infiltration north and south? Were there any understandings about that?

NOLTING: I'm not sure, but I wouldn't be surprised that it was mentioned ^g are we going to stay with these same ground rules? I think so.

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O'BRIEN: Just one final thing on that. . . .

NOLTING: And I'm sure they said, "Don't let the Americans get any heavier in here." And ^{Nhu} Ngu said, "Don't let the Chinese meddle in this one."

O'BRIEN: What's the reaction when Washington finds out, or when they get knowledge of this ^g ~~g~~ about some of these attempts on the part of ^g the plans, the so-called plan to work things out between Diem and the North Vietnamese?

NOLTING: Their reaction was immediately treason.

O'BRIEN: Treason?

NOLTING: At least some of the activists ^f felt that this was treasonable. And I got into real difficulties on occasion trying to say, "Wait a minute. Maybe it isn't so treasonable. Maybe this is the way to compose this thing. Give them a chance. They're not all that stupid ^g and they're not going to betray us."

O'BRIEN: Well, there's just one thing we have left to go ^g and that's. . . .

NOLTING: I'm afraid I ^{we got} have to go.

O'BRIEN: We can get that next time.