

**McGeorge Bundy, Oral History Interview – JFK#4, 3/13/1972**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** McGeorge Bundy

**Interviewer:** William W. Moss

**Date of Interview:** March 13, 1972

**Location of Interview:** New York, New York

**Length:** 20 pages

**Biographical Note**

Bundy was Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1961-1966). In this interview, Bundy and Moss discuss documents relating to military aide, Vietnam, and the coup against Diem.

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McGeorge Bundy, recorded interview by William W. Moss, March 13, 1972, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

McGeorge Bundy

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McGeorge Bundy—JFK#4

Table of Contents

| <u>Page</u> | <u>Topic</u>  |
|-------------|---|
| 1           | Communication among departments after the Bay of Pigs         |
| 4           | Intelligence briefings  |
| 6           | Frederick Dutton's memo on the role of military aide          |
| 8           | Memos discussing Vietnam and the Ngo Dinh Diem government     |
| 11          | Clashes over policy in Vietnam                                |
| 13          | Memos prior to the coup against Diem                          |
| 17          | President Kennedy's decision to form a coup                   |
| 18          | The American University Speech compared to containment policy |

Fourth Oral History Interview

with

McGeorge Bundy

March 13, 1972  
New York, New York

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Let me begin by showing you this. May 16, 1961. It's a memorandum that you wrote for Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] to give to the President on use of the staff, and this is after the Bay of Pigs.

BUNDY: Yeah.

MOSS: And what I'd like from you on that is, well, how the President [John F. Kennedy] reacted to it and how much of it went into effect, what impact this particular memorandum had on the working of the staff. [Interruption] I know you never had any organized daily meeting. Now, what other things in there strike you as....

BUNDY: Well, I think that the President really did settle down over a period that I wouldn't find it easy to date, but that I would guess that it runs from about here to the end of the year.

[-1-]

MOSS: This is from May to the end of '61.

BUNDY: Yeah. In sorting out the way he would deal with the world. And if you take a longer framework, you could say that the man we were dealing with in the fall of 1963 really didn't have the kind of constant preoccupation with the immediate press headline of who had told what to whom that seemed to be reflected in this memorandum. And, by the same token, at least in my relations with him, my staff's relation to him, we had learned how to deal with him and, perhaps, he had learned how to deal with us in ways in which this kind....The kind of disconnection and kind of sense of ineffectiveness that is reflected in this memorandum had gradually been replaced by a pretty good sense of what it was he wanted to do and what our relation to what he wanted to do ought to be and a clearer sense of whose responsibility was where. Some of the problems never did get solved. As it was mentioned here, this business of getting the right guy to

[-2-]

be assistant secretary for Latin America, that was still on the agenda in November 1963. But that's part of the wider question of his relationship to the Department of State and to the divisions of the Department of State.

I would say that this reflects a very characteristic problem: organizing the White House. Here is the staff man trying to tell the President how he should organize his day. Eventually what we did instead was to work out the ways and means of communication that were responsive to the way he wanted to live. And his own sense, as I said a minute ago, of priorities and emphasis changed. And so I think the worry that is expressed here disappeared, primarily by a process of very rapid and sustained daily communication, which I clearly wasn't having with him then. I would guess that he and I didn't become easy on the telephone, for example, really until after this period, whereas by 1963 we were transacting all kinds of business in and out on the

[-3-]

telephone.

The front office-back office problems he did gradually sort out, so that it was clear who he wanted to see that way and who didn't. That's a very complicated question which O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn Lincoln] would sort out. [Interruption] So I don't believe I ever....You know, I'm sure we talked about this memorandum in some way.

MOSS: You don't remember his immediate reaction to it?

BUNDY: What we finally did with the intelligence briefing was to get a document, which he really did read, which—I want to get this right because it was changed for Lyndon Johnson. One of them read it in the morning and the other read it in the evening. McCone [John A. McCone] came over a lot. JFK liked McCone. He and I got along fine and there was no sense of end run in that relationship.

In about this same period, they were setting up Max Taylor [Maxwell G. Taylor]. There was a very comprehensive fuss over—Max wanted a proposal he made for a cold war

strategy board. Have you encountered that?

[-4-]

MOSS: Yes. I remember this, yes.

BUNDY: Well, it was an enormous chart. I think I've mentioned it in the Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt] thing.

MOSS: Yes, you did.

BUNDY: It sat up in the President's bedroom for weeks because nobody could think of where else to put it. And finally, I think blessedly, it was decided that we were not going to govern the foreign affairs of the country through a cold war strategy board. And Max came and lived in that corner off ice over in the EOB [Executive Office Building], and, as he says in his memoirs, initially our mutual relations were a little stiff and uncertain, but we became pretty good friends.

MOSS: The whole matter of the intelligence briefing brings up this next memo, which is of an earlier

[-5-]

date, February 22, 1961. It's a Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] memo on the role of the military aide. Now, the military aide, I find in a lot of the documents, acts as sort of a channel between the intelligence community and the President, as well as the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] and the President. Dutton here is outlining some of the conceptual problems of the military aide's role.

BUNDY: I clearly talked to Fred about it. My guess is that he may not have sent the memo in exactly this way. I would probably have told him that Clifton [Chester V. Clifton] was an uncommonly civilian military man and that I didn't have any worry about his doing the intelligence briefing. I think that the end run transmission business was bad and that Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] gradually took care of that. By the end of the JFK time, McNamara always let me know what he was saying to the President on anything but military promotion and assignment; that never came in my office, nor did I

[-6-]

see any reason why it should. We had no special competence there.

MOSS: It would have, however, I assume, on peculiar things like the MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] setup, and that kind of thing?

BUNDY: Oh, you know, yes and no. I don not think that I had any significant role on....Oh, the question of Taylor's instructions when he went out as ambassador...

MOSS: Oh, well that is later.

BUNDY: That's later. And the question of the ambassador/ MACV relationship, yes, that would come through. We would be involved in that. This last question of the President's military aide, his Defense Department aide, I think was more a matter of signaling that Clifton was the senior man in relation to the naval aide and the army aide and the air force aide, Shepard [Tazewell T. Shepard, Jr.] and what's his name....

MOSS; McHugh [Godfrey T. McHugh].

BUNDY: McHugh.

MOSS: If I read them right, too, he was clearly the most capable.

[-7-]

BUNDY: Oh, Shepard was an able man, but very much of a naval officer. And McHugh was just sort of an amiable drinking flyer, I would say.

MOSS: Okay. The next thing, I want to move into the Vietnam thing here and go over the 1963 events. We didn't get to that in the earlier interview. Let me give you first, just to review, the words that you used in the Neustadt interview on the whole Vietnam situation.

BUNDY: Okay, well...

MOSS: Any thoughts on that just before I get into the rest of this?

BUNDY: No, I think I would have to agree that the Brinkley [David Brinkley] interview does suggest that he felt that what happened there would matter elsewhere.

MOSS: As you said, he wasn't prepared to reject the domino theory.

BUNDY: Not a bit.

MOSS: If he was not enthusiastic about it, he wasn't prepared to argue against it.



BUNDY: He was aware of the double proposition that what happened there would affect what happened elsewhere and affect American interests. He said that in a number of ways, on a number of occasions

[-8-]

in public. But he was also aware of the other proposition that you couldn't do it if they couldn't do it. Those two propositions are the defining elements within which you had to make decisions all through this period.

MOSS: Okay. I'm going to preface this next lot by saying that as I read through the files, I find a thread of dissatisfaction with the way things are going—early, quite early, before '63, before the battle of Ap Bac in January—a continual searching for possible alternatives to the Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] government.

BUNDY: This is a thread that you find in the President's mind?

MOSS: No. I find it in the cables.

BUNDY: The cables.

MOSS: Right. For instance there is...

BUNDY: The outgoing cables or the incoming cables?

MOSS: The outgoing cables. The outgoing cables primarily.

BUNDY: So those would be Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.], Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal]....

MOSS: Right. Hilsman, Forrestal, and Harriman [Averell W. Harriman] later.

BUNDY: Do you find many with the presidential clearance on them?

[-9-]

MOSS: No. Not until later. Not really until we get into August does the President's hand begin to show in the thing. Early on in an exchange of cables that I do not have here unfortunately, Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] is instructed to make contacts with the opposition to the Diem government.

BUNDY: He objects to that.

MOSS: He comes back in his best diplomatic, old school tie, kind of gentleman from Virginia....

BUNDY: "The ambassador is accredited to the government."

MOSS: Right, right. This kind of thing. He says, "I see all these people all the time. I have a pretty good idea what they're up to, but if you're asking me to go out and sow seeds of discontent, don't ask me to do that as an ambassador." All right. And the pressure for him to do this gets stronger and stronger, particularly from Hilsman and Harriman and Forrestal.

The cables that I have here and the memoranda, I think, illustrate the clash of views between Harriman and Nolting, and Forrestal and Nolting particularly. I'd like you to just have a look at them. The first three are on the issue of Diem's breaking diplomatic relations with Laos when the Laotians accredited the DRV [Democratic Republic

[-10-]

of Vietnam] ambassador. [Interruption]

BUNDY: Notice the date here. This is...

MOSS: Back in September or October '62.

BUNDY: October '62. It's right smack in the middle of the first week of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

MOSS: That's right.

BUNDY: So I imagine this is Averell operating on his own.

MOSS: On his own. But I think there is here a fundamental outlook difference between Harriman and Nolting, and a personality difference that is very strong.

BUNDY: Sure.

MOSS: And the feeling that I get from reading the whole thing, from reading all these memoranda of conversations at the White House and so on, is that these basic outlooks were as important in the decision-making as were the merits of the case Diem/anti-Diem in Vietnam. Is this fair? Am I reading it right? Or should we reserve that to a later...

BUNDY: No, I think there is no question that the difference in temper between people who thought like Nolting, somewhat less intense degree like Taylor, people who thought like Harriman, was very intense.

MOSS: All right, it was intense. I also get the impression

[-11-]

that from the beginning the cards were stacked against Nolting: Harriman had the prestige, he had the high regard of the President; that really nobody rallied to Nolting's position in the advocacy kind of battle that went on. We'll perhaps get into this a little bit.

BUNDY: I wouldn't be able to recite on that.

MOSS: Okay. Let me show you very quickly some Forrestal and Nolting things. Forrestal commenting on some things from Nolting. [Interruption] All right, any thoughts that the series of things brings to mind? How, for instance, did the President receive Forrestal's memoranda? I read a rather didactic tone in some of his things and I was wondering how the President responded to that kind of presentation.

BUNDY: Well, I think that the President had some considerable direct contact with Mike Forrestal and, therefore, I think Forrestal would have known pretty well what was on the President's mind. And what sounds to you like a didactic tone is more likely a written follow-on to a continuing process of communication.

MOSS: That's worth saying because it doesn't appear

[-12-]

evident from the papers. Okay, the next item here is the beginning of the whole coup business. The top item is the famous August 24<sup>th</sup> cable, and some follow-up cables, and then a memorandum of the conversation at the White House on the 27<sup>th</sup>, where everybody was reviewing things. [Interruption] Okay, let me ask you first of all your recollection of that weekend, the cable, the clearing process, and the President's reaction to the cable, and your reaction to the cable.

BUNDY: Well, I have always assumed that I knew the essence of the cable and approved it and made sure that the President coincided and approved it. I can't tell you from this document how we did that, but one of the things that I'm clear about is that the clearances were much wider than show on this front sheet. And that may be one of the reasons that people like Taylor went into a spin when they saw it. Because it looks as if nobody beyond George Ball had seen it. Well, in substance that's not true. The substance of the telegram was certainly cleared with the President, and I certainly knew about it, and

[-13-]

Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] knew about it. I do not know what other military clearance it

had.

MOSS: All right. I have a cable of the 28<sup>th</sup> from Taylor to Paul D. Harkins. Paragraph two says: "FYI State to Saigon. 243 was prepared without DOD [Department of Defense] or JCS participation. Authorities are now having second thoughts."

BUNDY: Yeah, well that's the characteristic FYI.

MOSS: There is in the memorandum of conversation one point there at which I have underlined, a question as to whether it might be possible to cut our losses. I don't see this really figuring in any of the debates on the thing. It's mentioned that one time.

BUNDY: In this memorandum of conference.

MOSS: Right. And I wondered how seriously it was considered to perhaps say, "Well, let's just back off and let Diem or the generals or what have you either sink or swim on their own." There is also in that memorandum of the conference, I think, a fairly clear statement by Nolting of his case on the whole thing. [Interruption]

[-14-]

You might look at this next one, too, of the 28<sup>th</sup> in which the two cases really, the Nolting case and the Hilsman case are argued back and forth. And I really think that all of the conferences that succeed the same questions are raised again and again and again without any real resolution.

BUNDY: That sounds right to me. [Interruption]

MOSS: I think that as a matter of fact all the rest of these things really contain rehashes of the same thing. What I really wonder, I come back to the same question again, and that is how did people stack up? What was the impact on the president of the personalities and of the facts of the case? There is one here, speaking of the facts of the case which were very vague, on Friday, August 30<sup>th</sup> in which it ends with, "Our feeling was that we were dealing with shadows and not reality insofar as the Vietnamese generals were concerned. The whole Vietnamese situation, everyone here and in Vietnam is in the dark." The facts being confused and the play of personalities being so strong in the debates, I just wondered how the President could make up his mind on this sort of thing, whether he really did. There is

[-15-]

a point at which Harriman obviously thinks that he has, that he has made the decision to go,

and Harriman snaps off that anybody who says that this isn't the policy had ought to be reviewed.

BUNDY: I think the president wanted a successful coup and didn't want an unsuccessful coup.

MOSS: Yes, I think that's clear.

BUNDY: And that's what accounts for all that back and forth with Lodge [Henry C. Lodge], for example, in the Pentagon Papers. I think he was persuaded that Harriman was probably right, that we couldn't make it with Diem and Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu], that it wasn't going to be easy to separate Diem and Nhu although he was delighted to have Lodge keep trying on that, that he did not wish to be in the position as I said in my interview with Neustadt, of directly opposing the military, particularly, or even Nolting, but he didn't really feel that the Diem regime could make it the way it was going. I think it's about like that.

MOSS: I get the feelin that he was led rather than leading by the momentum of the whole Hilsman-Harriman-Forrestal kind of thing. Was that fair?

[-16-]

BUNDY: Well, there's nothing odd about it. Here is a very difficult and painful decision and the government is divided. Hilsman, Harriman, Forrestal conspicuously, Ball clearly, Lodge and, I would guess, I to a degree, anyway were trying to work out the consequences of the proposition, one, we can't make it with Diem unless Diem shifts, and the prospect of his shifting is so low that there's probably going to have to be a change of government. And that set of propositions was very compelling to those people. They were closer to it, obviously, on a day-to-day basis than the president, and it's natural that they should be pressing that argument. And, of course, it's very familiar bureaucratic practice to take a presidential decision or a presidential leaning and turn into your justification for going your way and preventing other people from interfering with you. The President's own state of mind is much more clearly reflected in those cables to Lodge than in what Averell will have said back at the department or in his own cables.

MOSS: Okay, good. Now let me set up something else here, and that is a thesis that had we gone with Diem and Nhu, and even if Nhu, as was hinted at one

[-17-]

point, had made some arrangement with Hanoi whereby they could have come to some sort of terms or if the French neutralization idea had been brought in more strongly, was this really inconsistent with the objectives as the President and Rusk and McNamara saw them in Southeast Asia?

BUNDY: Certainly inconsistent with the objectives as Rusk or McNamara then saw them, and I don't think that option was ever really alive in this period. That's the sort of thing that one hears much more about after the event than in those during the summer and fall of '62. The people backing Ngo Dinh Nhu—let's put it that way—and the government didn't include any of the people who thought that neutralization was a useful answer.

MOSS: Okay. Because I have heard this stated as a case for the Nolting position looking back, hindsight.

BUNDY: If so, that case was absent from the government.

MOSS: Okay. And I put it against the whole American University speech kind of tone and that sort of thing, and it seemed to be running in two directions on that. The American University speech in one way and the hard-line on holding the containment line in South Vietnam in the other one. Is this

[-18-]

an inconsistency and was this perceived as such?

BUNDY: No, I don't think so. I think the American University speech was a speech about our relations with the Soviet Union...

MOSS: Yes, it was, primarily.

BUNDY: ...and Vietnam was an enterprise in our engagement in or involvement in Southeast Asian containment or limitation of what was perceived as clear-cut, carefully camouflaged aggression—a lot of other things too, but aggression certainly. I don't think that the President felt that the American University speech was a speech about what to do about the internal tensions and disagreements over ways and means essentially. Because what you find Ball and Harriman and Hilsman saying in these memos is, "We can't win with Diem," not "We can't win."

MOSS: Yes. What did you and the President and so on mean by winning.

BUNDY: I think really what was meant all along by winning was what is still meant by winning, mainly preventing defeat by force by the North.

MOSS: Okay, this was the context in which the whole thing was couched. All right, I've just about used up your

[-19-]

hour. Let me ask you another question, a follow-up on the Robert Kennedy interview, that I did with you. I don't believe I asked you whether or not you were involved at all in Robert Kennedy's negotiations with Johnson on that blue-ribbon committee to look into the Vietnam question in '68.

BUNDY: No.

MOSS: Not at all. Okay, I think that will do this for this time and I'll look back over things and see what the next step is. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-20-]

McGeorge Bundy Oral History Transcript – JFK #4  
Name List

**B**

Ball, George W., 13, 17, 19  
Brinkley, David, 8

**C**

Clifton, Chester V., 6, 7

**D**

Diem, Ngo Dinh, 9-11, 14, 16, 17, 19  
Dutton, Frederick G., 6

**F**

Forrestal, Michael V., 9, 10, 12, 16, 17

**G**

Gilpatric, Roswell L., 14

**H**

Harkins, Paul D., 14  
Harriman, Averell W., 9-12, 16, 17, 19  
Hilsman, Roger Jr., 9, 10, 15-17, 19

**J**

Johnson, Lyndon B., 4, 20

**K**

Kennedy, John F., 1-10, 12, 13, 15-19  
Kennedy, Robert F., 20

**L**

Lincoln, Evelyn, 4  
Lodge, Henry C., 16, 17

**M**

McCone, John A., 4  
McHugh, Godfrey T., 7, 8  
McNamara, Robert S., 6, 18

**N**

Neustadt, Richard E., 5, 8, 16  
Nhu, Ngo Dinh, 16-18  
Nolting, Frederick E. Jr., 10-12, 14-16, 18

**O**

O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 4

**R**

Rostow, Walt Whitman, 1  
Rusk, Dean, 18

**S**

Shepard, Tazewell T., Jr., 7, 8

**T**

Taylor, Maxwell G., 4, 5, 7, 11, 14