

Chester L. Cooper Oral History Interview—JFK #3, 6/9/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Cooper, a liaison officer to the National Security Council staff from the Central Intelligence Agency and staff assistant to Ambassador Harriman at the Geneva conference on Laos (1961-1962), discusses Vietnam policy during the Kennedy administration, Henry Cabot Lodge's ambassadorship to Vietnam, and the November 1963 coup that overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem, among other issues.

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Chester L. Cooper—JFK #3

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Third of Three Oral History Interviews

with

Chester L. Cooper

June 9, 1966
Arlington, Virginia

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: There was, as I understand it, a special committee set up on Vietnam in 1961. Were you involved in that to any extent? Supposedly, it was to report directly to Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara].

COOPER: Well, I spent a good part of 1961 in Geneva.

O'CONNOR: But I thought possibly you might...

COOPER: I'm not sure that that was.... No.

O'CONNOR: Okay, and also another thing. You were in Geneva at this time too, but President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] made a trip to Vietnam, or Lyndon Johnson, Vice President Johnson, made a trip to Vietnam in '61.

COOPER: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Did you ever hear anything about the conclusions that he came to, or the policies he recommended as a result of that trip.

[-45-]

COOPER: Well, I think that his trip led to the subsequent trip by Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] and Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor]. Unless I'm wrong about my timing, the Vice President went to Vietnam in about June of that year, and he and President Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] signed a joint communiqué which in a sense committed both of us to the common enterprise and hinted at, if not actually provided for, more U.S. help; or at least Johnson recommended this to the President [John F. Kennedy]. I think that was the basis of this report and other reports of the deteriorating situation, which led to the subsequent Taylor mission, the results of which were implemented in early '62.

O'CONNOR: The reason I asked that is because I had heard it said before that—well, of course there's a controversy over whether John Kennedy would have gone as deeply into Vietnam had he remained President as the Johnson Administration has—and I heard it said before, that even during the Kennedy Administration one of the strongest voices for a strong stand in Vietnam was President Johnson's—then Vice President Johnson's—and someone referred to the Johnson policy in Vietnam even as early as 1961-1962. I wondered if you had ever heard comment on that?

COOPER: Well, only in the sense that his trip did produce a report which strongly supported the case for increased aid to Diem.

O'CONNOR: You said you—we talked about your first trip to Vietnam the last time we were discussing but would you discuss some of the trips to Vietnam, or would you perhaps discuss how you came to be asked to make that first trip, in other words how you really became involved in the Vietnamese situation?

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COOPER: Well, maybe I mentioned this before, I had been involved in the Vietnamese situation since the early fifties.

O'CONNOR: Sure.

COOPER: And at the Conference in '54. But there was a desire to get a reasonably objective assessment of Diem. I'm not sure that anyone having anything to do with Vietnam had a reasonably objective assessment of Diem, but nonetheless there was a feeling that someone who was not involved in the day-to-day policymaking with philosophical or policy commitments to him might provide a better feel for Diem and his prospects than the ordinary foreign service officer or military officer or intelligence official.

O'CONNOR: Well, what were some of your other assignments then in Vietnam? The first assignment essentially had been to get some sort of estimation on Diem.

COOPER: There must have been close to a dozen or more subsequent trips to Vietnam. These were in the post-Diem period. These involved the reporting techniques for both political or political-economic and military reports. The difficulty with the problem of dealing with Vietnam then, and even now, was the mass of reporting that had been coming through. Yet there was difficulty in getting a real feel for what the situation was. Every analyst on Vietnam must have had hundreds of pieces of paper coming across his desk every week. In part this was because of the intense interest in Washington on virtually every facet of the Vietnamese situation. Moreover, because of A.I.D.'s legislative responsibilities; and because the Department of Defense, for a whole host of reasons, required a great deal of reporting on almost every facet of the situation, scores of reports came to Washington every week. They came through, much in raw form, from Saigon and cluttered not only the desks but I think the minds of an awful lot of people working on the problem. One major task that

[-47-]

I had in Vietnam was to rationalize this and get the kind of reporting that was useful; eliminate the time-consuming and irrelevant stuff and to put the whole business in a bit more perspective.

O'CONNOR: I've heard it said that for a fairly long period during the Kennedy Administration our advisors were training Vietnamese troops essentially for a Korean type war and that the switch was not made until mid-way or later in the Kennedy years.

COOPER: Yes.

O'CONNOR: So they were training them for another thing really than for a guerrilla type war?

COOPER: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Well, how did this decision come about? Do you remember this?

COOPER: It wasn't an overnight decision. It was something of an evolution. But there was some fear—it may not have been justified, but nonetheless it was quite prevalent—that the North Vietnamese troops would in fact cross the 17th parallel and a substantial number of G.V.N. [Government of Viet Nam] troops had to be deployed along the 17th parallel. It wasn't until the early sixties, perhaps about '62 when a reassessment of the military situation took place in Saigon and Washington. As a result of that it was quite clear that the stationing of large military units along the 17th parallel was a waste of manpower and just what the Communists would probably like to see done. A large proportion of the A.R.V.N. was tied up in fixed positions. This seems to be the kind of war a military officer, American or Vietnamese would prefer to fight. He's got his large military

units and his permanent headquarters. It took a bit of doing to free Saigon's units from the stationary, defensive kind of plan.

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O'CONNOR: Can you put your finger on any people in particular who were more or less responsible for the shift in ideas?

COOPER: I suspect that Taylor must have had a role because he was made Special Assistant to the President for counterinsurgency. His own trip to Vietnam convinced him that this was not a conventional war but a really unconventional kind of a war. Taylor and some of the people who were anxious to exploit the capabilities of the special forces and to beef up their capabilities made an impact, a sufficient impact by '62 so that major changes were made.

O'CONNOR: Okay, there was considerable optimism in '62 and even in '63 on the part of American spokesmen about Vietnam, and there is a famous statement By McNamara, Secretary of Defense McNamara that we would have the boys home by Christmas, or something like that. Do you remember anything in connection with those statements or with that optimism? It seems incredible that—I mean the optimism wasn't felt by everyone—it seems incredible that such a statement could come out.

COOPER: Right. I was present at a conference when McNamara said we would get our forces out by the end of '65. He said this in late '63. It was in connection with a review of the Vietnamese war. I can remember a meeting in Mac Bundy's [McGeorge Bundy] office; Bill Bundy [William P. Bundy], who was then Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs in the Pentagon, and Mac Bundy and I were in Mac Bundy's office going over this draft prior to Mac's taking it up to the President. I had lived through enough optimistic statements to be worried about the promise to get out by 1965 point, and leaned very hard on Mac to eliminate that reference. Mac agreed, but Bill Bundy said that he was "under instructions" and he had absolutely no discretion. He could change many things in that McNamara statement but the 1965 point, that was one thing he could not change. If it were to be taken out the President would have to discuss it with McNamara. And that was the way it was left. Mac took it upstairs to the President, but he had no success in getting it out.

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O'CONNOR: When he says "instructed position," do you know who he means when he says...

COOPER: McNamara. McNamara apparently had agreed with the President earlier on this statement. McNamara gave Bundy a great deal of discretion about other parts of the statement, but that was one thing that could not be changed.

O'CONNOR: Well, once again then who was responsible for the writing of this particular statement, or who would be responsible for McNamara's taking this attitude? General Taylor, is that who this would be? Or...

COOPER: No, I don't know.

O'CONNOR: I was open for an intelligent guess. I wondered if.... I don't really know. I don't have any idea myself...

COOPER: To be honest about it, I think McNamara himself, as well as others both in Vietnam and Washington, had moments of great optimism and moments of deep pessimism on Vietnam. This is actually one of the interesting psychological factors that influenced us, these great swings toward deep depression and great optimism. It lent almost a manic-depressive quality to our analyses.

By and large, most people involved in Vietnam, and I would include myself here, tended to be somewhat more optimistic about the course of events than people not involved. Speaking for myself, I must admit that unless I maintained some degree of optimism it was hard to get out of bed in the morning. One tended, I think, to magnify those points, which made the situation a little promising and tended to discount a little the things that made it less so.

[-50-]

O'CONNOR: That's an interesting comment on intelligence in general.

COOPER: Yes, well. I don't want to be unfair about this. The reporting—and there's been a lot of nonsense about this—the reporting tended to be quite objective.

In some cases, the reporting tended to be overly pessimistic. This is one of the things that people should realize. The man out in the field who is trying to do something and is terribly frustrated and annoyed and feels that either as a result of bad luck or as the result of some stupidities on the part of his counterparts, or even his own, tends not to put a gloss on his reporting, but tends to write in black despair if something goes wrong.

Of course, there are situations in which chaps tend to exaggerate the good things and play down the bad, but I think it's hard to generalize. Basically the fellows who are optimistic are not so much those in the field, as the chaps in headquarters in Washington and Saigon who, aware of our own great capabilities, aware of the bigger picture, and sometimes just in a subconscious effort to keep going, tend to take a happier view than perhaps the objective circumstances might indicate.

O'CONNOR: Okay, another question that's bothered a lot of people about the Vietnamese business that you might be able to comment on to some extent—a number of people have maintained that the whole Vietnamese war and related situation

was really handed over to Defense Secretary McNamara and, in a sense, Secretary of State Rusk [Dean Rusk] abdicated his position as having a right to say something about it. There's been much criticism of this and I wondered if you would comment on whether or not this was so, first of all, whether or not you think it was a good idea if it was so.

[-51-]

COOPER: To some extent it was so. It was referred to as "McNamara's war" for good reason. To some extent, you must recognize that the Department of Defense in the early period of the Kennedy Administration was, in a sense, a brand new department. You had a whole host of new fellows who came in fresh with bright ideas. The State Department, and even A.I.D., was basically a career service well up into the Assistant Secretary level. Secondly, the very personalities and energy outputs of people in the State or A.I.D. just happened to be somewhat less than those of the Pentagon. By and large the State Department did tend to back away from Vietnam. Now there's another aspect to it too—and I'm not sure how much of a role this played—but the State Department deals with the world, and the Defense Department had just a few active international activities going. One of them was Vietnam. They really could zero in. The State Department was very much involved in a whole host of other things and Rusk probably had less of a feeling during this early period that Vietnam should command as much of his attention as McNamara felt it should command of him. When all is said and done the fact is that McNamara, by sheer force of energy, personality, and a very aggressive staff, a very good staff, tended to take charge. McNamara himself, at least on the few occasions when I was present, took a not altogether happy view of this and often, or at least on those occasions when I heard him talk about it, claimed that he had to do it, by default, because neither the State Department nor A.I.D. seemed to zero in on the problem. I really think that's true, as a matter of fact.

O'CONNOR: All right. We can get on to a couple of other small questions before we end this particular area. Do you have any comments to make on the appointment of Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador to Vietnam? Did you hear any talk about that or were you involved in that? That struck some people at the time as a very strange appointment to be made since Henry Cabot Lodge was very obviously a Republican.

[-52-]

COOPER: Well, I have nothing to add to what many people have already said, which was that the President had a feeling that of all the problems he was going to confront, the one that would require the greatest bipartisan support would be Vietnam. It was the stickiest one. The fact that Lodge was a Republican was neither shoved under the rug nor counted against him. There were other qualities that he had aside from being a Republican. He had an obvious familiarity with international affairs and he had, in the course of his life, some experiences with the Far East and some personal experiences with Buddhists. But the real problem was that one needed in Vietnam an ambassador of sufficient stature so that the military commander would not outrank him either in terms of rank or in

sheer terms of prestige or power. The ordinary foreign service officer, the ordinary career minister has a difficult time coping with a four star general when there are military operations in the picture. It's one thing if the general is there in a planning role. When there are actually military operations going on, the weight of the military tends to grow in geometric proportions compared to the weight of the political folk. And it was terribly important to get an ambassador who, in terms of prestige and in terms of his non-career commitments—the fact that he had nothing to lose in terms of a career in the foreign service—would be able to stand up to almost any senior military officer that would be put in command. The danger basically is that an ambassador under such circumstances is quite likely to degenerate into a political advisor to the military command. And this can happen without either the general or the ambassador realizing it, or wanting it, but just by the very nature of things this is the way something like that could go. It's terribly important that this not happen in Vietnam.

[-53-]

O'CONNOR: Okay, his role, Lodge's role in the overthrow of Diem is something about which the controversy is great and much comment has been made. I wonder if you'd care to comment on that at all?

COOPER: Well, obviously Lodge went there with a much greater flexibility than Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] had when he was there. Lodge had no continuing personal commitments to Diem, and could regard the situation as fairly open and fluid. More than that, the fact that we changed ambassadors at that time, and that Nolting had conspicuously identified as a man in favor of a policy of working with Diem was regarded as a signal to Diem that he'd have to prove himself anew. Lodge's role in terms of being an independent or a motivating factor in disposing of Diem will probably always be a bit cloudy. He didn't actively push the button, obviously. But in a situation like this Washington must rely on the reports of the Ambassador. The reports of the Ambassador can be honest, reliable, dispassionate, comprehensive, but still, simply because of the very nature, things will always have an element of subjectivity. Another ambassador, another man in the same position might use a different adjective or a different adverb to describe the situation, which might result in a lowering or raising of the temperatures back here. In this sense Lodge assumed a very important role because he took it on himself to do most of the reporting on the situation there. I'm not sure how many members of the embassy saw what he was sending back. I think very few.

O'CONNOR: That's incredible, isn't it? Wasn't he getting his information, at least in part, through the embassy staff?

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COOPER: The information was coming to him, but his telegrams to the President or to the Secretary of State were...

O'CONNOR: Were strictly between him and the...

COOPER: Yes. I'm sure that the General commanding M.A.C.V. [Military Assistance Command Vietnam] saw most of them; I'm not sure he saw all of them. Other key men in the mission saw some of them, or parts of some of them. My own impression is that Lodge kept his reporting to the President and to the Secretary of State very close to him.

O'CONNOR: Why would that be? Would he be afraid of the disagreements or just opinions different from his?

COOPER: Oh, possibly so. Basically this is the way Lodge works. He regards his communication with the President or the Secretary as privileged and doesn't want to be inhibited by the fact that it has been given wide circulation in the embassy. There was a great deal of difficulty with the press during that period and he may have been worried that there would be leaks, or he may have been worried that the embassy team, which basically he inherited were not quite on his side yet and decided to play it somewhat alone, although by and large he still does that. His cables to the President are pretty much written by him.

O'CONNOR: Okay. I didn't mean to interrupt you there. That was kind of an interesting, curious point. You were still talking about Lodge's role in the overthrow of Diem, or really the American government's role in the overthrow of Diem, and I wonder if you'd elaborate on that at all. We have sometimes been charged with contributing to the overthrow and that has been on occasion denied.

[-55-]

COOPER: Well, the fact of the matter is that, whether in Vietnam or any place else, anyone who is anxious to unseat the government or the regime in power by coup or even through an election is anxious to get the stamp of American approval. This is a very meaningful thing. In terms of a possible coup, a particular general can tell other key generals who may not be quite so committed to the cause that the United States is backing him, or is backing the coup, or has withdrawn its support from government. In the case of a loyal opposition, it's frequently useful to be able to point out, too, that the United States is on the side of the outs. This puts a great responsibility on anyone in the embassy who deals with the outs. In particular, in Vietnam it put great responsibility on the embassy to be very careful in their dealings with a host of people who were trying to organize a coup against Diem. We were quite aware that there was a great deal of ferment. Many generals and some civilians were anxious to get Diem out. But there was a great deal of pressure to make sure that there wasn't any cause for any general to be able to say that he had U.S. backing. This wasn't all that easy. First of all because communication with some of these chaps was difficult. By and large the line was that, "We cannot tell you not to do it, but

we cannot give you support. We don't think you have a realistic plan, but this is your problem." Now, how a man who is anxious to get some kind of a feel for U.S. support would interpret these things is very difficult. And I suspect that some of them felt that either we were letting them down and we may not have meant to, or many of them interpreted this as being a signal to go ahead, although we may not have meant that either. There was some feeling that a few of the people who contacted the embassy were part of the Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu]-Diem entourage who were trying to provoke the embassy into supporting a supposed opposition fellow so that Diem could use this as a way of pointing out the interference of Americans in the government process in Vietnam. So there was obviously reason to be careful there.

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In the last analysis I suspect that what we did, by implication at least, was to indicate that we would not—this was at the very last stage of the game—we would not oppose any meaningful, non-communist coup against Diem. We could not give our support in advance for such a thing nor would we be able to promise automatic support even if the coup succeeded because we weren't quite sure of the people involved.

O'CONNOR: There was a famous telegram saying something to that effect in late 1963, in the fall of 1964. I wonder if you were at all familiar with the origins of that telegram?

COOPER: Yes, yes. This was the one that was sent by Hilsman [Roger Hilsman]? Yes, well by late 1963 there must have been two or three or four indications a week that one group or another was seeking support or sanction for deposing Diem. And at some point—it may have been October or November—it was important to at least lay down the ground rules for this. Although we had a fair amount of information on what the various plotters were thinking about, we weren't even sure that we knew who all of them were. There were many people who, for one reason or another, wanted to get rid of Diem, and not all of them agreed on a common program. Obviously, we were working until the very last minute to get Diem and Nhu to be some what less rigid in their whole approach to the problem of the Buddhists in particular, but in other respects as well.

O'CONNOR: Okay, just really a few more questions on this. The Krulack [Victor H. Krulack]-Mendenhall [Joseph A. Mendenhall] missions, August 1963, mission where one man came back saying one thing and another one came back saying an entirely different thing, were you there or were you familiar at all with that mission? Do you know why in the world these guys came back with two different—is this because they went with two completely different...

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COOPER: Well, I suppose so. I think if you ask two people to examine any situation

that's at all complicated and ask for their independent reports, I dare say there will be significant differences in their interpretation. Mendenhall and Krulack are both very able men. Their backgrounds are very different. A career foreign service officer and a career marine officer tend to look at a complicated, political, military problem in different lights. This reflects everything in terms of their various views of politics, and sociology and economics, as well as their training in their own professions. By and large I think, and this is not in terms of what I knew about their views before but what I've known about them since, Krulack tends to be quite optimistic about our being able to cope with a situation like this; Mendenhall tends to be kind of pessimistic about our ability to do it. So you started out, obviously with two chaps who would look out the window today and one would say, "It's kind of cloudy," and the other would say, "It's kind of sunny." I think the President's comment after listening to these two was interesting and amusing. But I think that it was significant largely because it reflected on the complexities of the situation and not necessarily on the competence of the two reporters. I suspect that if you got two foreign service officers to go out there and look at the situation you'd get significant differences in their views; if you got two military officers to go out you'd get significant differences in their views, you get these two different views so long as you don't ask them to give a single report, water it down so that it turns out to be just a bunch of platitudes. If you ask for a meaningful, personal report from two observers of the same situation, a complicated one like Vietnam, you're quite likely to get these differences.

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O'CONNOR: Okay, I think perhaps we should—we're not going to have very much time as we're getting close to what you said your limit would be—so perhaps you could talk a little bit about the Yemen...

COOPER: Well, I have just one or two points on this that I wanted to go over. You know they had a revolution in Yemen. There was a tendency on the part of some in the White House to come up very strongly and very quickly in recognition of the revolutionary Yemen regime. And a good case could be made for this.

O'CONNOR: You referred to someone in the White House. Are you willing to say, or do you know whom?

COOPER: Yes, well primarily it was Komer [Robert A. Komer]. And you could make a good case for this if you were on the side of revolution. There were some others who felt that either it wasn't necessary to do it quite that fast, or maybe we didn't need to do it at all. And, to be fair about it, I took that view although I knew less about the Middle East by far than the others who did it. But the only point I want to make is that on the very day that recognition was to be announced, I had gotten some intelligence to the effect that the fighting was not going along as well for the revolutionaries as we had thus far been led to believe. And I made a fairly strong pitch to at least postpone the announcement of our recognition of the revolutionary regime at least for a couple of weeks

until we could assess the significance of some of the stuff that was coming in that indicated that for one reason or another—either because we didn't really have a good feel for the situation up to then or because there had been significant changes in the capabilities of the loyalists—the royalists—that might indicate that it wasn't a cut and dried affair that would be over in a month or so. Unfortunately we had gone pretty far down the line by then. It was one of these unfinished problems. I got this stuff in time for the 9 o'clock staff meeting, and the recognition was to be announced at noon. And I just wasn't able to turn this thing off, or turn it around. And I'm sorry I wasn't.

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As it turned out two or three years later the thing was still going on unresolved.

O'CONNOR: Okay, unless there's anything else you care to add.

COOPER: No.

O'CONNOR: All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW #3]

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