

Chester L. Cooper Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 5/16/1966
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 Britain's response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, his decision to show the missile photographs to the British press, and the Vietnam War, among other issues.

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Chester L. Cooper

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Chester L. Cooper—JFK #2

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Second of Three Oral History Interviews

with

Chester L. Cooper

Arlington, Virginia

May 16, 1966

By Joseph. E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

COOPER: As a member of the Board of National Estimates during the period of '62, I was very much involved with the Castro [Fidel Castro] affair. And that, plus my experience in the U.K. [United Kingdom] previously, led to my selection to go to London with the U-2 photographs of the missile sites for the purpose of briefing Macmillan [M. Harold Macmillan] and key members of the British government prior to President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] speech which was to take place on Monday night, November whatever it was.

O'CONNOR: I think it was the second.

COOPER: The second, yes. I heard about my trip on Saturday night and was to leave at 8 o'clock on Sunday morning. I arrived at Andrews Field—early Sunday morning and found that Ambassador Dowling [Walter C. Dowling], who had been called back from leave, was at the airport and he and somebody from C.I.A [Central Intelligence Agency] was to brief the German government, especially Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer]. Mr. Acheson [Dean G. Acheson], who together with Sherman Kent of C.I.A. was to go to Paris and brief DeGaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle]. We set off in the President's plane and landed about 11 o'clock at night, London time, at an R.A.F. Base [Royal Air Force]

someplace north of London. Ambassador Bruce [David K.E. Bruce] was there and we all met for some coffee in the R.A.F. control shack and Acheson explained to Bruce what was involved and what my mission was. This was the first Bruce had a chance to hear about it, except for the warning that I was coming. The others took off for Paris and then on to Bonn and I went back to London with Bruce. But just as we were stepping in the car I told Bruce that I was instructed to have an armed escort with me. Bruce pulled up his jacket and pointed to the pistol that he was carrying. He was the armed escort.

We got to London—I guess it was about an hour and a half or two-hour ride—very late on Sunday night, and early Monday morning contacted Macmillan. He was tied up until about 11, I believe. We went over to see him, Bruce, and myself, with the pictures. Bruce saw Macmillan alone for a few minutes and then called me in. Macmillan's reaction when he saw the picture was very interesting. He looked at them for a while and then said, more to himself than to us, pointing to the missile sites, "Now the Americans will realize what we here in England have lived through for the past many years." Then he was concerned that this remark, which was quite spontaneous would indicate that he either unsympathetic or perhaps even chortling a bit over our difficulties. He hastened to assure us that it was an instinctive reaction and that he was terribly worried about the missiles and would, of course, provide the United States with whatever assistance and support that was necessary. He said that he was going to have considerable trouble with the Commons and with the British public because there was great suspicion in England at that time that we were exaggerating the Castro threat. The pictures satisfied him, but might be regarded as a bit of fakery unless somehow they could be shown to the British people generally.

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Bruce and I had promised Macmillan that we'd get him a copy of the President's speech well before broadcast time, which was I guess, about 7 o'clock Washington time, about midnight in London. It was then about 2 o'clock in the afternoon and we still hadn't a copy of the speech. I spent the rest of Monday afternoon trying to get it. At about 4:30 or 5 o'clock London time, we were still unable to get it and I finally arranged for somebody in Washington to call the Prime Minister's office and dictate the speech to his secretary. We had, of course, an early draft of the speech, but obviously this wasn't enough for Macmillan to act on.

After the President's speech on Monday night, many elements of the British press and the British public were not terribly sympathetic. I decided on Tuesday afternoon that it would be a good idea if I brought the pictures over to both Gaitskell [Hugh Gaitskell] and George Brown [George Albert Brown] who was the shadow Minister of Defense—to convince them of their authenticity. I spent about two and half hours with them.

O'CONNOR: Who authorized you to go over and see the shadow Minister of Defense?

COOPER: Bruce. We obviously notified Washington of what we were going to do. Brown was very sympathetic. Gaitskell was at first very dubious and was not at all convinced that the missile sites we had identified were offensive in

character. In fact it was quite clear that he was hoping that he could convince himself and us that they were anti-aircraft sites.

O'CONNOR: Brown was apparently satisfied, though.

COOPER: Brown was satisfied.

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O'CONNOR: I'm surprised that Brown, being Minister of Defense, that his judgment would not be accepted almost immediately by Gaitskell.

COOPER: No. Brown and Gaitskell were at swords' points on a lot of issues at that time. Brown told me later—and it was even more clear many months later—that Gaitskell was really “off his form.” He had a feeling that a Labour Party victory was in his grasp and had taken some rather surprising stands for Gaitskell on a lot of issues, including the Common Market. And Brown and I had a rather difficult time with Gaitskell for the first half hour or forty-five minutes; Gaitskell pointed out that the United States had bases in England and bases in Turkey and so forth, and he couldn't see very much difference, and indeed thought that we could work out some sort of a deal with the Russians over the Cuban missiles. He suggested that if we got the missiles out of Turkey, perhaps the Russians would get their missiles out of Cuba. Another problem Gaitskell raised was the whole question of the credibility of the pictures in the eyes of the British public. Finally, Gaitskell, after quite a difficult session, was convinced that these represented a threat, primarily based on the argument that they changed the whole balance of the East-West relationship and in a sense made a quantum jump in Soviet capabilities with great consequences for N.A.T.O [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]. He agreed that he would be sympathetic to the government and make a good speech, in Commons when the issue would be raised the following day, that is Wednesday. Meanwhile, I primarily because of Macmillan's suggestion and because of the skepticism in the British press, I had pretty much made up my mind that the press ought to see those pictures. Following the Gaitskell session—that I guess was over at about 5 or 5:30—there was going to be a B.B.C. [British Broadcasting Company] special broadcast on Cuba at 8 o'clock in which Lord Home [Alec Douglas-Home, Home of the Hirsell] was going to speak.

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O'CONNOR: This special broadcast was planned as a result of your mission?

COOPER: No, no. It was a weekly broadcast on major foreign affairs problems and that week they had chosen Cuba. I don't know whether the B.B.C. originally planned to have it on Cuba but after the President's speech they may have decided that Tuesday should be Cuba night. I had discussed with Bruce the possibility of having the pictures shown on B.B.C. television. My own feeling was that it would be okay since, although they had not been actually released in Washington, they had been shown to

reporters. I had called Washington, before I went over to see Gaitskell late that afternoon to tell them of the B.B.C. broadcast later that evening. I asked permission to show the pictures. The connection was very bad, but I got through to the White House and I think it was Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] that I talked to. He said that, yes he thought it would be okay, providing I excised the names of the particular places where these pictures were taken. I don't know what his rationale was for that or whether he had checked that out with anybody. But, anyway it was good enough. When I left Gaitskell I was in a hurry to get back to the embassy with the photographs to reproduce the pictures for use on B.B.C. television. This was then about 6. Brown agreed to take me back to the embassy in his car which was a mini. As we approached the embassy the streets were cordoned off and it was quite clear there was quite a demonstration in Grosvenor Square. There was a large "Ban the Bomb" demonstration in front of the embassy with kids lying in front and so forth. It was a pretty dicey thing getting into the embassy with these very highly classified documents.

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O'CONNOR: Oh brother!

COOPER: I'd move up to the front of the crowd clutching this briefcase full of the stuff and then get thrown back by some cop. I finally got into the embassy, got the pictures duplicated. My memory is a bit confused on the timing because there was a press conference, too.

O'CONNOR: With whom?

COOPER: With the British press. Let me see if I can reconstruct that. That was also Tuesday. Let me go back a bit, may I?

O'CONNOR: Sure. Some historian twenty years from now can straighten this out.

COOPER: As I reconstruct the situation, before I saw Gaitskell I got a very pale okay to show the pictures on television, and that was all right.

O'CONNOR: This was from Forrestal, that you were talking about?

COOPER: Yes, yes. That was fairly early on Tuesday, maybe about noon—for the B.B.C. broadcast. Then again before I saw Gaitskell, which was, I guess, must have been about 6 or 7 o'clock that night, not earlier, the questions of the press came up in the embassy. The press reaction to Kennedy's speech was not very sympathetic. The Commons debate would be on the following day; we felt that it might be useful if we could actually show the pictures to the British press and if I could meet with the British press and have a press conference. So, that in fact happened. I called Washington again. This time I couldn't get anybody—everybody was flapping around there. I then sent a wire just saying I was going to do it unless I got a Washington veto. And so I met with the

British press—this was late in the afternoon on Tuesday I think it was 4:30—knowing that the British television

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was going to flash the pictures later that evening. The British press fellows felt strongly that we had a good case.

O'CONNOR: Having seen the pictures?

COOPER: Having seen the pictures. They felt that, if they could print the pictures they could turn the whole case around. So I, with an okay from Bruce, said, "The hell with it. They're going to be shown over the B.B.C. and the Commons had to meet in an atmosphere in which the statements of Gaitskell and Macmillan would be regarded with some credibility." So I printed up copies of the photographs and gave it to the press. All that took place before the Gaitskell-Brown meeting which was about 6 or 7 that night.

Anyway I got back to the embassy from the Gaitskell sessions at about 9, and by the time I looked up all of this stuff and sent a telegram out to Washington telling them what I had done it was about 11. I finally got to my hotel room. Then the telephone to Washington seemed to be working very well, because I must have gotten six calls from the Pentagon and from the White House. The news of my session with the British press had come over Reuters wire and what the hell did I think I was doing giving out the photographs? Washington, Sylvester [Arthur Sylvester] in particular, had not seen fit to release it to the American press, and who said I could? By then I was pretty exhausted and so were the people on the other end of the phone, obviously—except that it was five hours later my time. I suggested that we wait to see how the press treats the story and how the Commons debate handles it.

I also pointed out that it was high time they released it to the press in the States anyway. On the next morning—Wednesday morning—I obviously looked at the British papers with some trepidation and was delighted to discover that the press conferred and the pictures had made a considerable difference. And the Commons debate looked like it was going to shape up well too. I stayed in London through Thursday and worked with both Macmillan's people and Gaitskell's people on their speeches in the Commons. New evidence about the missiles was coming in and I was anxious that Macmillan had the up-to-date material when he spoke

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to commons, but I was also anxious that Gaitskell not think that Macmillan was exaggerating the evidence I had shown to him. So every time I okayed an alteration in Macmillan's text I then went over to Gaitskell's and fixed his up.

I got back to Washington on Friday morning thinking that I was going to be fired. I wasn't.

O'CONNOR: I wondered if you ever did get any specific—not exactly a reprimand—but

anything of that sort?

COOPER: No. All I got Tuesday night were just querulous and rather petty complaints—at least that was how I regarded them on Tuesday night, but I had had quite a day between the press and television and Macmillan and Gaitskell.

O'CONNOR: Yes, well listen, it went well. I presume that's one reason why you didn't get fired.

COOPER: It went well. And since my instructions before I left were to brief Macmillan and to help him any way I could, I felt I acted within my terms of reference.

O'CONNOR: You interpreted this in the Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman] tradition.

COOPER: Yes. [Laughter]

O'CONNOR: You mentioned George Brown, Macmillan, and Gaitskell. Did you deal specifically with anybody else really?

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COOPER: Well, not in the Labor Party. There were several people in the government, intelligence people, the Secretary of the Cabinet and so forth.

O'CONNOR: Okay. I wondered briefly, there seems such a very short time between Saturday night and Sunday morning for you to prepare yourself to explain this material, which I should think would be quite involved.

COOPER: That's a good point. It was very involved and I'm not terribly good at maps and charts. But first of all, I'd been working on the national intelligence estimates and had seen the pictures and gone through several briefings. This was a great advantage. But secondly...

O'CONNOR: Seen these pictures. You don't mean these specific pictures, do you?

COOPER: Yes, of the missile...

O'CONNOR: I thought you didn't even know about the crisis until Saturday night.

COOPER: Oh no. I was one of the few people, even in the intelligence community who had been working with the Cuban missiles problem from the very beginning.

O'CONNOR: No, I didn't know that and I knew that there were so few people who did know about it that I simply took it for granted that you hadn't.

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COOPER: No. There were about three members from the Board of National Estimates who were involved in this, and I was one. And there were two or three analysts, and then of course the photography fellows and one or two others. It couldn't have been more than twenty in the Agency. But even so, I wasn't terribly confident that I could explain all the technical details. But we had on the plane with us a fellow who was a photographic analyst who explained all of this. We spent most of the six hours between Washington and England going over the pictures. They can be very difficult to read, as good as those pictures were. There were shadows and tree lines and revetments and that sort of thing.

O'CONNOR: But he didn't go in and do any explaining himself?

COOPER: No, he went right back to Washington.

O'CONNOR: Oh, one thing I wanted to ask you in connection with our intelligence regarding Cuba. I've heard absolutely conflicting statements as to the value of information we had through Penkovsky [Oleg Vladimirovich Penkovsky] as to the Soviet reaction or Soviet capabilities and I wondered if you'd comment at all on that—whether this played a specific role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, the intelligence that we got through him or not?

COOPER: I'm not sure I can add very much of value to that. It was certainly an important input and it added to the confidence with which people made their subjective judgments, but I don't recall anybody bringing that or anything else up as a specific indicator.

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O'CONNOR: Okay, one other thing I don't know whether you'll be able to add anything to or not, but you commented briefly on Gaitskell's thinking possibly we could trade bases in Turkey or make some sort of a trade, and of course it has been said several times in several places that John Kennedy had requested that the missiles in Turkey be taken out prior to this Cuban Missile Crisis. So, do you have any comments to add on that or...

COOPER: I sat in on some of the discussions about taking those out. As I remember those meetings—there may have been others that I wasn't present at—they mainly addressed the proposition that the missiles in Turkey were obsolete. They represented more of a psychological harassment than they did a positive contribution to the defense of the West. By substituting other weapons, or other weapon systems which would not be as provocative, we might get a more effective defense. So, although

consideration for removing the missiles in Turkey did precede the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was primarily geared to the technical capabilities of those missiles in the light of the political problems they were creating.

O'CONNOR: The conference that you say you were in on, involving this question, they took place I presume before the Cuban Missile Crisis was in the wind?

COOPER: Yes, yes.

O'CONNOR: Who else took part in these conferences? Do you know who was involved in the decision-making or in the discussing of this?

COOPER: Well, I can remember some of them were at the White House staff level.

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O'CONNOR: All right, we can move from the Cuban Missile Crisis unless you have anything of a general nature to add to it. Well, we can move, but I am not sure until you tell me where we can move to. I have some suggestions, but I thought perhaps you might have something else in mind. We've dealt with two subjects now that you specifically mentioned, and dealt with them to some length, I think very well.

COOPER: Let's see. We've done the Laos conference.

O'CONNOR: And this, I suppose, was the next major problem. You were involved in the Laos conference and it went from '61 into '62. And I suppose the Cuban Missile Crisis was somewhat of the next major crisis that you were involved in. Is that correct?

COOPER: Yes.

O'CONNOR: There were other things that intervened, but you for all practical purposes, were in Geneva.

COOPER: That's right. Yes. Meanwhile of course during that period the Indochina or the Vietnam war began to be stepped up.

O'CONNOR: I had some questions I would eventually ask you about that, but I wanted you to suggest whatever you want.

COOPER: Well, I'm not quite sure what the next one is. One that sticks in my mind was my trip to Vietnam in March of '63. There may have been something in between, and I better look and see.

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O'CONNOR: Well, there are a couple of things that occurred to me. I didn't know whether you might be involved in it or not, but certainly it's within your general field, one might say—the problem regarding Indonesia and the West Irian conflict. That was in 1962.

COOPER: Yes. Well, I was involved only to the extent that I got involved in national intelligence estimates on the situation. Those primarily dealt with the capabilities of the Indonesians against the Dutch, the consequences of the confrontation between the Dutch and the Indonesians. They were fairly standard assessments of the situation, as those things went. There were some key problems in connection with the Indonesia-West Iranian crisis in terms of our policy towards the Dutch and Sukarno and the assessment of the value of the Dutch adherence to N.A.T.O. as opposed to the new forces in Asia. But those discussions primarily took place in the State Department.

O'CONNOR: But I would think critical for the decisions that were made, well, simply would be the estimate as to whether or not the Dutch would fight, whether or not the Dutch would be capable of fighting, whether or not Indonesia had the military strength and economic background to carry out any sort of a....

COOPER: The essence of the estimate, as I remember it—and it would be easy enough to check on it—was that if the Dutch put up a show of force the Indonesians probably would not confront the Dutch fleet. Then I think there were some considerations as to whether the Dutch could use N.A.T.O. equipment for this purpose, and I'm not sure that there wasn't a policy decision that they could not. You really better look into that one. But as I remember it, the intelligence assessment was that the Indonesians would not buck a major Dutch show of force. And the real question was whether the Dutch could or would mount such a show of force.

[-35-]

O'CONNOR: Okay, maybe we shouldn't go into that Indonesian problem any deeper than that because it probably would be better for me to get it a little bit clearer in my mind.

COOPER: Yes.

O'CONNOR: But I had a whole raft of questions on Vietnam that I thought I might ask you, and rather than begin by asking you those, if you would I'd appreciate hearing something about the mission you said you had, the journey you had to Vietnam in 1963.

COOPER: Well, that turned out to be the first of very many. My specific mission on this occasion was to explore whether we could, "win with Diem" [Ngo Dinh

Diem]. I was asked to do this primarily I think because it was as much an intelligence as a policy question, perhaps more. Then the whole question of what to do would be a State Department-White House problem. But the question of whether we could move ahead with Diem was basically an intelligence problem and I spent about six or seven weeks out there; did a great deal of traveling around the country and spent a fair amount of time in Saigon, talking to both American and Vietnamese officials. I spent one whole day, literally a day, with Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] and Diem. This was an exhausting experience. There was a first session with Nhu that lasted about three and a half hours and then there was a session with Diem that lasted four hours and then there was a subsequent session with Nhu that lasted about three hours.

O'CONNOR: He had a terrific reputation for conversing at length.

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COOPER: Yes, yes. There wasn't much conversation, this was one of the problems. It was mostly Nhu and Diem monologues. I must say I came away from those meetings very disturbed and it was not all due to the fact that this was a rather difficult way to spend a day. I was more disturbed with Diem than I was with Nhu. Nhu seemed to me to make sense. Diem, I just wasn't sure of. Nhu seemed to have a pretty good idea of what he wanted to do and how he would go about doing it. The thing I guess that distressed me more than anything else with Nhu was the feeling one got from sitting in his office—that here was a man for whom no decision was too small to warrant his personal attention. His desk literally looked like a range of the Alps in terms of dossiers and papers and just a vast amount of stuff which he apparently was addressing himself to. And I had been told before, and have been told since, that these were not things that were just sort of hanging around, that one way or another he would or felt that he had to delve into each of those matters that were on his desk. This struck me as not being an especially effective way to run a government. And the fact that he was ready to spend so much time with me when basically our business could have been done in a quarter of the time made me all the more nervous.

Diem was another matter. Diem was highly nervous, terribly repetitive, not altogether relevant. He gave the impression on the one hand that he knew a great deal about what was going on in the countryside—and in fact he did. I mean he'd point to roads that were being built in a rural area, and when I checked later I found, indeed, that those roads were being built in that particular area. Nonetheless, despite this close familiarity which he seemed to have with everything that was going on, one felt that he was not with it; that these were almost an intellectual exercise, that he didn't seem to be able to engage the fundamental issues. One would ask him a question and he'd go off into a whole string of irrelevancies and put in a dash of history and—I came away with the feeling that this was a man who was over-extended emotionally, spiritually.

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O'CONNOR: You had not met him in 1954 or subsequently had you?

COOPER: No.

O'CONNOR: This then was your first meeting with him?

COOPER: This was my first meeting with him. When I came back and was asked about Diem I expressed a lay psychologist's concern for his sanity and his health. I remember saying to Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] that I really didn't know whether he was well or ill, or whether he was completely sane or was losing his mind, but that if I were his mother I'd be very worried about him. He had deep manifestations of nervousness, great nervousness and tension, and an inability to focus things.

But, in the last analysis I must confess that, despite my misgivings about Diem, what I saw in the countryside and what I saw of Nhu, and what I saw of some of the other ministers in balance I came down on the side that we probably had no alternative but to stick with Diem. In part this was based as much on my own feeling that the United States had very little skill in changing the political future of a country as remote, intellectually and geographically as Vietnam. I could not see, and more importantly people more knowledgeable than I could not see any other figure on the scene who seemed to be able to attract all the conflicting elements of Vietnamese politics. Even if there were such a figure I had grave doubts that we could get rid of Diem and put another other chap in, whoever he might be. This was not to say that if this happened because of what the Vietnamese, themselves, did and the chap who came in was first rate, that it wouldn't be a good thing. But I couldn't see that we would be able influence the course of events in a very satisfactory way. I still don't know whether I was right or wrong.

[-38-]

O'CONNOR: It's pretty hard to tell, even at this date. It sounds as though the policy of ousting Diem was being considered at that time, and indeed had been considered for some time prior to that. Do you know when it had really entered our thinking?

COOPER: Yes. Well, this was March '63. I think very honestly that as our commitments, both in terms of military advisers and equipment and aid, began to increase following the Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] mission and we saw much of it being dissipated and learned that many of our advisors found it extremely difficult to implement what seemed to be U.S. policy. Their counterparts were either inconsequential fellows and were unable to take any action because they didn't know how or because even if they were okay, bright, and aggressive, they were so under the thumb of Saigon and in particular Diem and Nhu that nothing could be done. And of course there were general signs of restiveness. Nhu and Madame Nhu [Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu] were quite difficult for the Americans to deal with. They wanted us there and yet were very worried about the advisor relationship. A lot of our men found it difficult to play the kind of delicate and passive role that an advisor—or at least that Nhu and Diem thought an advisor—should play. On the other hand, when they exceeded what the Nhus thought were the limits of their advisory capacity

and especially when they reported the inefficiency of a counterpart or of a province chief or senior military officer, Diem and Nhu frequently flew into quite a rage. The relationships between the two governments were getting pretty testy, I suppose, as early as mid '62, maybe even before that. But certainly by mid-'62 there were great misgivings about Diem and Nhu and Madame Nhu.

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O'CONNOR: Ambassador Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] I suppose was there at the time you went.

COOPER: Yes, Nolting was there.

O'CONNOR: Were you at all influenced by his feeling toward Diem and Nhu? Did you have any contact, or much contact with him when you went there?

COOPER: Yes, but to be candid about it, I didn't see much of him until after I had seen Diem and Nhu, and had begun to formulate some thoughts of my own. Nolting I think was a pretty effective ambassador in operating within the terms of reference he had there. It's easy to criticize someone who got into that kind of a jam in hindsight, but I think he was doing a pretty good job. The point is that we knew then, and we know now, although sometimes we don't always hoist it in, that the leverage of the government in Washington or our ambassador is very limited. It doesn't make any difference, as our experience in Vietnam today indicates, how much of a stake we have, how many troops we've got there, how much money we're putting in: no matter how hard or frequently Washington pounds the table when we deal with the local ambassador here, or how much we pound the table in terms of what we say in the telegram to our own ambassador to Saigon, unless that other government wants to do something in its own interest, however it regards its own interest, there's very little that we can get done. And this was the problem with Nolting. Washington expected that simply because we were pouring in more stuff that Nolting's influence over the course of events in Saigon with a Diem and a Nhu would increase in proportion. In point of fact, it probably didn't increase at all and may well have decreased, because they became quite aware that the more we put in, the less credible was the only sanction we had. That sanction is still the only sanction we have, which is to pull out. And it's less credible now than it was in 1962 or 1963.

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O'CONNOR: People comment all the time about the fact that the defense measures that were being taken by Diem and Nhu and even by the United States in South Vietnam were something like a house of cards about to collapse—the strategic hamlet program for example was pointed out as being a kind of a phony attempt; it really wasn't as strong as we expected it to be. And yet that house of cards didn't collapse until after Diem fell. Is it your opinion that the collapse would have been disastrous, or that the disaster that did occur would have occurred even if Diem had remained in power?

COOPER: Well, first of all when you talk about the strategic hamlet program you've got to distinguish between two aspects of it. One is, was the strategic hamlet a useful idea in terms of confronting the Viet Cong guerrillas? The second is whether the strategic hamlet program was a good conception generally. Let's take the last point first.

When Diem talked about the strategic hamlet program he grossly exaggerated the number of strategic hamlets there were, and he grossly exaggerated the effectiveness of the strategic hamlets which actually existed. Perhaps he himself was fooled or perhaps he was consciously exaggerating. The strategic hamlet program was so highly touted in Vietnam at the time, and judgments about the performance of Vietnamese civilian officials and military officers were geared so directly to the progress of the strategic hamlet program that there was a natural tendency for these men to exaggerate their own progress to their superiors who in turn...

O'CONNOR: The same sort of problem the Soviet economists face.

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COOPER: Exactly, exactly, or the great leap forward program in China. And it was only when one went out to a particular hamlet in some remote area that one discovered that a hamlet that was reported to be completed was not in fact completed, perhaps just barely started or that a hamlet that was divided by a little road may have been counted as two hamlets.

So, the size program and progress of the program was exaggerated. The concept of a strategic hamlet varied a great deal from place to place. In parts of Vietnam it was not too unlike the fortified villages in Israel or our own stockades against the Indians where people during daylight hours could farm their lands and in the evening they prepared for the security of their fortified village. The problem was that in many of the areas, especially in the Delta, the pattern of population distribution would not lend itself to this kind of an arrangement. A village or a hamlet might be spread house by house along a canal instead of a cluster of a hundred little houses. In order to construct a strategic hamlet in communities that were spread out very thinly, they had to move, frequently by force, an awful lot of people, and destroy their houses and so forth. There were many instances where this program created more trouble than it did security. Many of these people began to feel that the Viet Cong was probably at least as beneficent as their own government. But in certain areas where the communities already existed as a hamlet, in a sense, it turned out to be a rather successful arrangement. Frequently, however, the whole business was accompanied by large doses of Diem's propaganda which took the form of essays on his own conception of personalism, which was a very complex mix of Confucianism and Catholicism with a dose of Marxism thrown in—much too abstract for most of the intellectuals to grasp even if they chose to subject themselves to it, and certainly much too complex and abstract for the ordinary peasant. These people, who were supposed to be provided, as part of the hamlet program, with some anti-communist indoctrination, were frequently exposed to the worst of the process; long harangues about these complex philosophical ideas that Diem and Nhu had

developed. The strategic hamlet program was not on the face of it a bad thing. And indeed, in one form or another it was part of every pacification program, including the

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present one. A pacified village now is one that is not too different from what an ideal concept of the strategic hamlet would have been.

O'CONNOR: Well, the question that I gave that prompted that answer really was you've said in effect that it was not entirely the strategic hamlet program, and it was not entirely a house of cards, and it was not entirely a disaster. But that's only one section really of Diem and Nhu's overall defense policy, or overall policy with regard to running the whole country, and what I really was trying to get at was, in your opinion and for what reasons would the disaster that did occur after Diem fell and almost as a result—or was the disaster the result in part of the fall of Diem? Would it have occurred anyway, or what?

COOPER: Well, if—you see I'm not sure what you mean by disaster—if you mean the resurgence of a great deal of political instability in the cities; the Buddhists against the Catholics; the students against the government—if that's what you're talking about, I suspect that Diem's policies in the last 18 months of his rule were such that it was in the cards that this political dissatisfaction would boil over. Short of major concession, short of the kind of concessions which I don't think were in Diem or Nhu's nature to make, it was inevitable, like a Greek tragedy. Now, it could have been staved off, I think, say three years before by progressive concessions to the Buddhists and a more liberal policy, progressive policy toward the students and intellectuals generally. But, I think by about mid-1962, these groups had gone so far down the road that it would have taken the kind of measures that it was very difficult to see Diem or Nhu being able to take, in the light of what we know of their personalities and their commitments and their own relationships with each other and so forth. The concessions would have to have been progressively greater. If you're talking about the increased activity of the Viet Cong during this period following Diem, I think that was on the upgrade anyway. So, frankly I think that if Diem and Nhu had been able to maintain their power the situation in Vietnam probably would have deteriorated anyway.

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O'CONNOR: The reason I asked that essentially was because you said that your views in March 1963 were, in effect, the best choice we had was to go with Diem. And I don't really understand whether or not you still felt that by November 1963 when the coup took place.

COOPER: Well, let me make it clear. My own feeling was that I didn't see frankly that even if we decided that we couldn't go ahead with Diem that we would, as the American government, be able to dispose of Diem and put another man in his

place. My own feeling was that short of the Vietnamese doing it themselves, I just didn't think that we had the capability or the knowledge to do this with the kind of facility and grace and intelligence that wouldn't create a situation that would be worse than what we had. In November of '63 it was quite clear that the Vietnamese had decided to do it themselves.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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